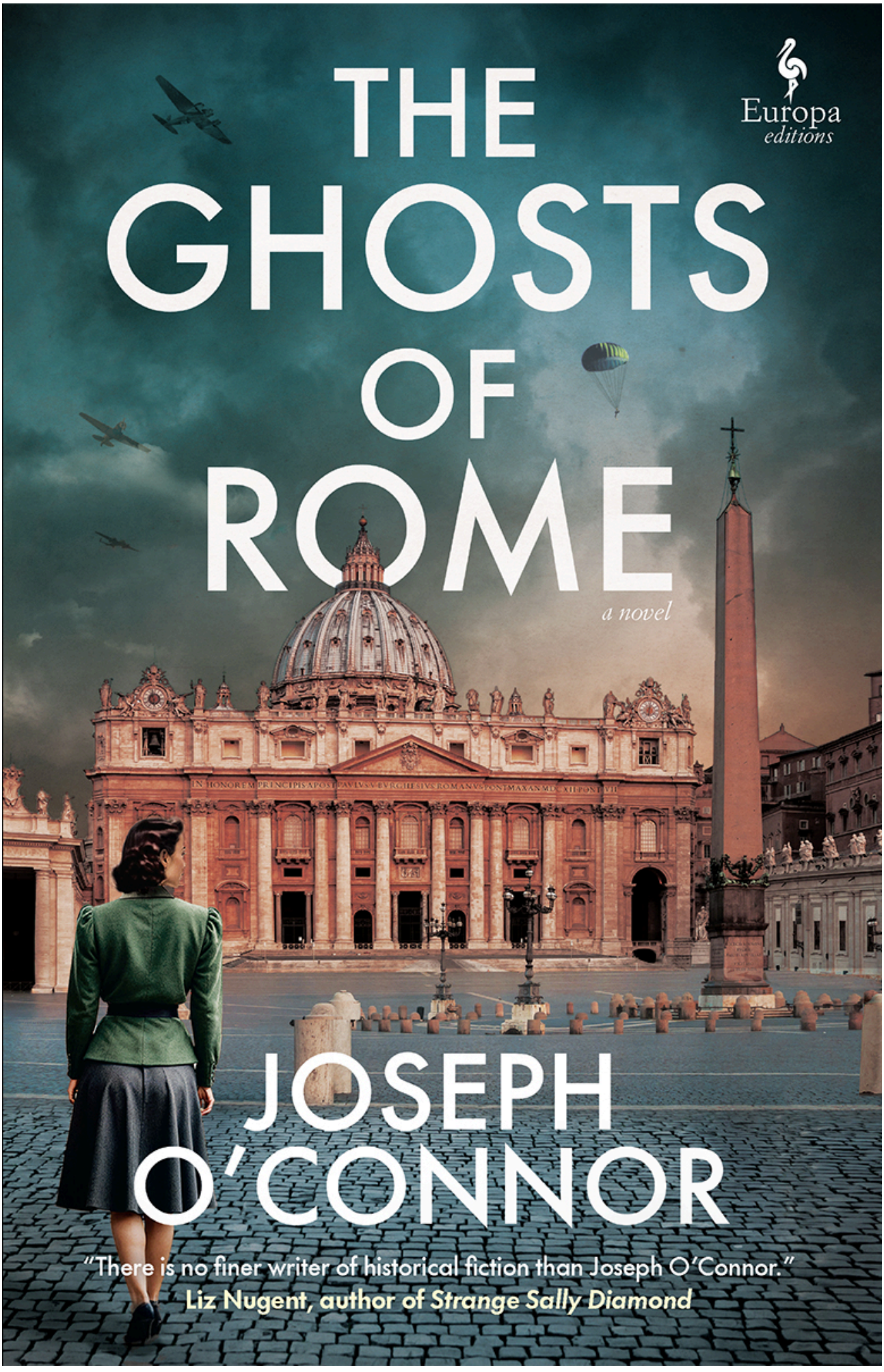
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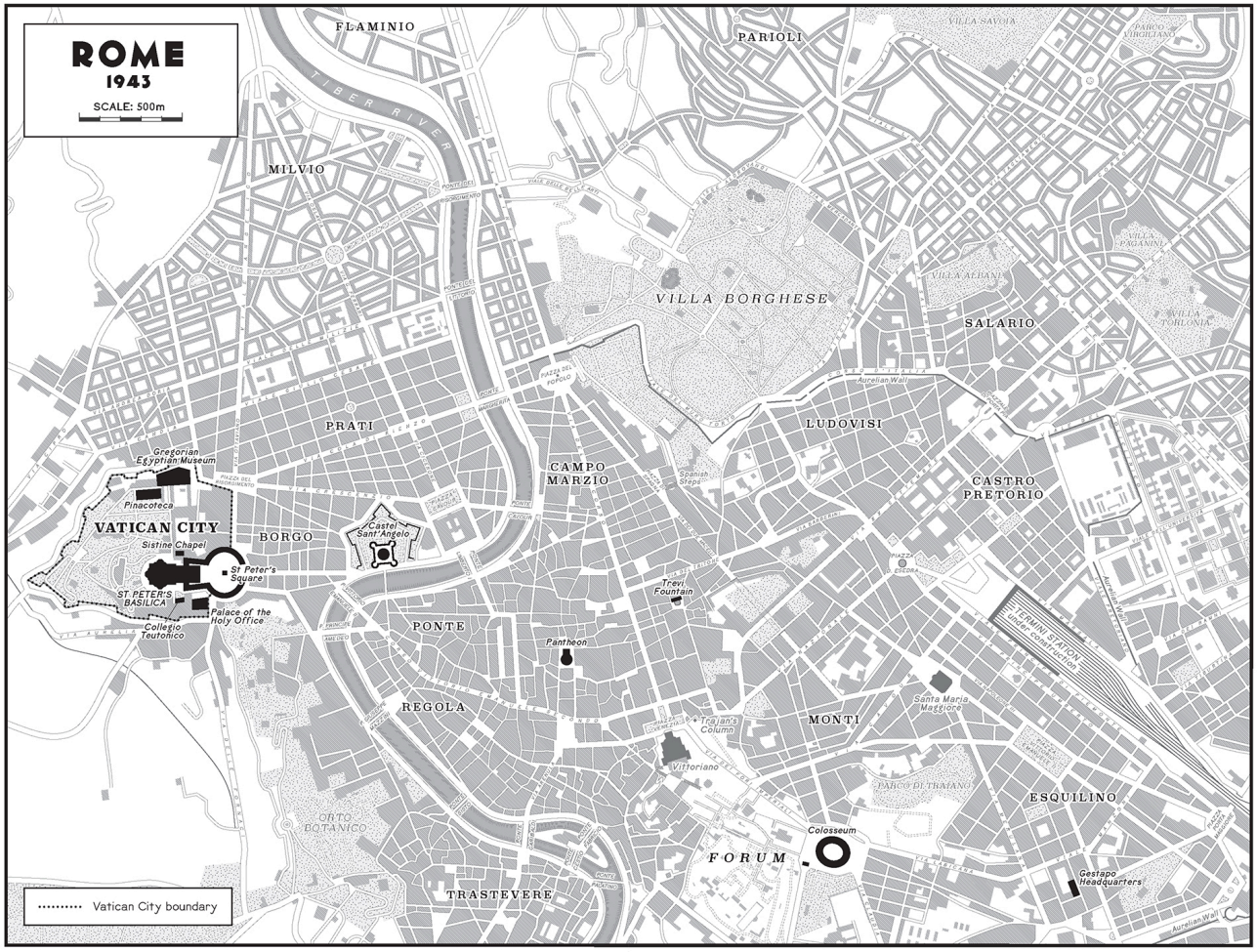
Joseph O'Connor

THE GHOSTS OF ROME

THE GHOSTS OF ROME

For Seán and Viola,
my father and stepmother,
with love


ROME
1943
SCALE: 500m
FLAMINIO
PARIOLI
TIBER RIVER
MILVIO
VILLA BORGHESE
SALARIO
PRATI
LUDOVISI
CAMPO MARZIO
CASTRO PRETORIO
Gregorian Egyptian Museum
Pinacoteca
VATICAN CITY
Sistine Chapel
St. Peter's Square
ST. PETER'S BASILICA
Palace of the Holy Office
Collegio Teutonico
BORGO
Castel Sant'Angelo
Trevi Fountain
PONTE
Pantheon
REGOLA
Santa Maria Maggiore
MONTI
Trajan's Column
Vittoriano
ESQUILINO
ORTO BOTANICO
FORUM
Colosseum
TRASTEVERE
Gestapo Headquarters
Vatican City boundary

February 1944. Six months since German forces occupied Rome. Five weeks since Allied fighters landed at Anzio, fifty kilometres south. Their advance is meeting ferocious resistance.

Inside the beleaguered city, the Contessa Giovanna Landini is part of a band of Escape Line activists known as “the Choir.” Their mission is to hide refugees and to help Allied soldiers escape from Rome, where things grow darker by the day under the rule of Gestapo boss Paul Hauptmann.

Prologue

WARNING

It is forbidden to read this
document without clearance from
Obersturmbannführer Hauptmann

Gestapo Headquarters, Via Tasso 145, Roma
TOP SECRET
Dossier on Leading Members of Criminal
Organisation Styling itself "The Choir"
now in hiding in Vatican City
File updated 9th February 1944

Enzo Angelucci, b. Rome. Age 36. Uneducated. At one time managed a news-stand near St. Peter's Square. Now pedlar, pickpocket, vagrant.

Samuel (known as "Sam") Derry, b. Newark-on-Trent, England. Age 30. Major, Royal Regiment of Artillery, captured in North Africa, imprisoned Abruzzo, Italy, escaped Reich custody by jumping from prison train. Tough, professional soldier. Do not underestimate.

Blon Kiernan, b. Ireland, town unknown. Age 19. University student.

Delia Murphy-Kiernan, b. Claremorris, Ireland. Age 44. Tiresome, opinionated woman, mother of previous subject. Professional singer. Drinks. Husband is senior diplomat, de facto ambassador of Ireland to the Holy See.

Giovanna (known as "Jo") Landini, b. Rome. Age 34. Countess, widow, leftist, volunteered as Red Cross motorcycle courier on outbreak of war. Inherited Palazzo Landini on husband's death, has other properties, artworks, owns tin mines in Cornwall, England. Ardent Roman Catholic.

John May, b. Whitechapel, raised Bermondsey, London. Age 30. Jazz musician, formerly nightclub doorman, now manservant at British embassy to the Holy See. Minor convictions at Southwark Crown Court for affray, carrying a lockpick, narcotics. Is an unreligious Jew.

Hugh O'Flaherty, b. Cork, raised Killarney, Ireland. Age 46. Catholic priest, rank Monsignor. Cunning, manipulative, strategic. Capable of donning a mask of charm but is ruthless. Plays golf.

Sir Francis (known as "Frank") D'Arcy Osborne, b. Hornby Castle, Wensleydale, North Yorkshire, England. Age 60. British diplomat to the Holy See. Attended Haileybury College, Hertfordshire. Has frequented degenerate nightclubs and associated with decadent persons. Appointed Knight Commander of the Order of Michael and St. George (KCMG) 1943.

Marianna de Vries, b. Zurich, (parents Dutch). Age 36. Reporter, lesbian, Swiss passport, Vatican City identity card. Fluent German, English, French, Italian. Writing a book on "Hidden Rome."

Person, name unknown. Since January it has been evident that the above criminals are receiving information from a well-placed informant, likely someone within the Roman Security Police. Vital to identify and liquidate him.

Act I
The Airman

1

23RD FEBRUARY 1944, ASH WEDNESDAY
07.00 HOURS

Eleven minutes from now, the air raid will start.

No one in the room knows what's coming.

The bells of the four vast basilicas summon the dawn, frightening away gulls from the belfries and balconies, startling wildcats from their nooks, rats from the trashcans.

Outside Gestapo headquarters on Via Tasso, the sentries change guard. Across Rome, shabby shutters clack open.

Mothers search cupboards.

Hungry children cry.

Beneath the rafters of what used to be the Vatican City *casa del pellegrino*, a lodging house for pilgrims suffering from bubonic plague, four friends are gathered in the draughty, decrepit little chapel where a tarpaulin is draped on the wall behind the altar to damp out the skirling breeze. Buckets have been arranged to catch the rain.

Covert photographs of these people are pinned to a corkboard in Gestapo headquarters. More are being taken at this moment, by a timed miniature camera hidden in a statue's eye.

The Monsignor's fingertips dip to the brass bowl of ash. Drizzle blurs the windowpanes. His voice is hoarse and low.

"*Memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris.*"

"Amen," says the Contessa Giovanna Landini.

As he traces the ashen cross on her forehead, she closes her itching eyes. Her headache gives a pulse like a startled, scuttling insect. Not enough sleep. Never enough sleep since the war came. Anxiety, hunger, the bleat of the air-raid sirens. For thirteen weeks her period has not come. The dreams she's growing frightened to have.

The Devil curates our nightmares, a nun told her once. As the conductor of an opera drives the orchestra.

Last night she dreamt again of her palazzo in the city. The sombre marble staircase, the lamps. The Quattrocento ancestral portraits and oak-framed Borromini drawings, the pomegranate trees through the leaded window, across the courtyard. Three art students from the Accademia making copies of the Goya, measuring with charcoals and thumbs. Mutating into the trio of haloed Apostles in the painting, now back to duffel-clad, russet-ringleted bohemians. The seven great mahogany wardrobes containing her gowns. The death mask of a poet opened his eyes as she passed. She was moving through the perfumed and gilded rooms, past the sculptures and heavy sofas, the hip-high Virgin Marys. The spine of a novel by Dickens translated into French, *Le Mystère d'Edwin Drood*. A piano was playing an old sonata by Clementi. As usual she had been searching for something and as usual hadn't found it. Paolo was there, somehow, although she had not seen him or heard him. The *plock* of a grandfather clock was his heartbeat.

On her right side now, D'Arcy Osborne shifts and coughs. He is present out of the tactful curiosity that is his diplomat's stock in trade and to respect his Roman Catholic friends. To her left, Delia Kiernan, here for the faith whose prelates and pieties sometimes burden her patience. Delia's daughter, Blon, and Sam Derry promised they would attend, too, but they haven't.

Marianna de Vries said she wouldn't—her Dutch common sense means a lie-in on Wednesday mornings, when the Escape Line roster does not require her—but in she hurries now, grey-faced, bog-eyed, declining to apologise for her lateness. Marianna rarely apologises. "I'm not sorry for much." Who knows why she is here? She herself doesn't know. She is one of those atheists with no interest in converting you. Her unbelief is worn in quiet comfort, like an old beloved quilt.

The Contessa finds herself silently saying the names of the quintet.

Delia, Frank, Hugh.

Marianna and Jo.

Around the world, across its time zones, tens of millions will attend the Ash Wednesday rite today, hearing the same dark words the Monsignor has just uttered, smoke-filled and strange and disturbing and comforting.

"Remember, man, thou art but dust, and to dust thou shalt return."

The crucifix on the altar blackened by candle smoke and time.

Rain dribbling into buckets. Shrieking breeze.

Lent commences this morning. Forty-six days of self-sacrifice. Some people swear off liquor; others fast or ration their pleasures. Johnny May scoffed at the notion, last night at the soup bowl from which a watery dinner was coaxed. "I ain't seeing much to give up, Treacle, being honest."

"Treacle" has become his way of addressing the Contessa, an informality she has come, after an interim, to find charming. An odd thought sometimes strikes her when Johnny May is talking. Sugar. Honey. Cupcake. Sweets. Fruitcake. Lambchop. Pumpkin. Shrimp.

How many of his endearments are also foods.

Felled by Roman flu last month, he's still weak, prone to sweats. His gasps through the fever phase had sounded to her like the yelps of wild dogs. She brewed him a decoction—she called it "a tisane"—of secret makings, nursed him back.

"You're a witch, babe," he wheezed.

"Quiet, Johnny. Drink this."

"Effing rank taste."

"But it works."

"Christ, my lungs."

Valerian, nightshade, belladonna. Fingerroot. Hyssop. *Aframomum melegueta*. Grains of paradise.

In the rain-tinted light, she murmurs the responses, but whatever immensity prayer is aimed at feels deaf and far away, a harbour disappeared behind a cloudbank. Change is coming to the Escape Line. Whatever certainty existed is dying. Enzo Angelucci has left the Vatican to go back to his family for a time. Delia and Blon will leave this morning.

To steady herself now, she tries to pray for the escapees—the "Books"—who must bear so much more than she must shoulder today.

Men hiding in attics, in cellars and outhouses, above stores, below apartment blocks, on half-sunken garbage barges in the Tiber. On crashed buses in alleyways. In abandoned schools and nightclubs. In the old granary near the Propaganda Fide on the Janiculum.

One moment from betrayal. Living every second in fear. Derry says he is losing count of how many are hiding in Rome, it must surely be five thousand and could be more. Streaming from the prisoner-of-war camps, smashing out of freight wagons on German trains. If they can make it to Vatican City, there's a chance of being saved. Find the Contessa Landini. She'll know what to do. Often, she's dressed as a Blue Sister. Or find the Irish Monsignor. In St. Peter's Square every morning. Black soutane, red sash. Name's O'Flaherty.

She looks at him now, as he raises the chalice. Grey-faced, exhausted, cut himself shaving. Boxer's nose too big for his face. A crimson bead of lavatory paper plastered to his chin. His birthday next week. Ageing a year every month, so it seems. In the purple vestments of Ash Wednesday, he looks gaunt. Derry says he's worried for Hugh's sanity. Leadership of the Escape Line has been too heavy; no one man could bear it. "Just remembering where everyone is."

Wanted by Hauptmann's Gestapo, the Escape Line leaders have been hiding out at Osborne's apartment in the Vatican since Christmas. Here they are relatively safe, at least for the moment. The territory of Vatican City is only a fifth of a square mile, but it is a neutral, independent state; no arms-bearing soldier of a foreign power may enter. She hears Hugh every night, pacing the floor in the small hours, opening the rusted shutters to look up at the stars or, lately, a dogfight, the Spitfires and Stukas diving through the deathly whiff of cordite.

As Mass concludes, he catches her glance, attempts the collaborative, uplifting smile he used to be able to perform. The ash on his own forehead is damp and ill-formed, more like a 7 than a cross.

She wonders who traced it there.

When?

"Dear friends," he says quietly. "To be here with you at the start of Lent. I'm grateful."

She has the feeling he doesn't mean it, that there is something more difficult he wants to add but his head is lowered now, as he shuffles towards the tabernacle and genuflects. He is fluent in silences; the sort of man who makes you think you are missing something important, or the swaying trees are causing the wind.

Time to get washed and changed. This morning, she's on mission. She is resolved, there is no turning back.

Her final talk-through with Derry needs to be done. She must be able to recite every minuscule detail of today's plan, the back streets she will take to Via Luciano Manara, the cross streets to avoid, the timings, the distances. The cut-and-run options if she twigs that she's been twigged. The safehouses to which she may flee,

the nooks around Trastevere where a false identity card or a change of clothes have been hidden. "Rendimento," their code word, the nineteenth they've run this year. She knows she could be dead by nightfall.

The stammer of rabid ack-ack fire draws them to the balcony. She sees the smoke, the tracks of bullets, from out near Poggio Mirteto. The wailing alleluia of the sirens, the thump of the ground. Through the soles of her shoes, up her spine, in her guts, in her eyeballs, in the fillings of her teeth. Plaster falling from the walls. Dust knocked from the lampshades. The clatter of shutters in the pilgrim house opening and closing as the air raid billows up.

Sickening, the wait.

The dread-drenched seconds.

Perhaps she is wrong, false alarm, mistaken sighting. Watchmen make mistakes, like everyone else—exhausted people aren't reliable; neither are the hungry.

Cristo Gesù, I implore you. Let there be no airstrike this morning. Mother Mary, take pity on a sinner.

The drone of a hundred bombers from high in the cloud cover. Already the asterisks of black smoke from the distant quarters of the city, where the railway station stands, and the German installations and fuel dumps, and the factories on the eastern outskirts.

Spurts of scarlet cannonade from the bunkers dug into in the Villa Borghese gardens; two Allied fighter planes explode, crashing into a third, which flips itself into a loop before sundering to a thousand fiery pieces.

Ambulances in the narrow streets of Vatican City. The clang of tolling bells sounding for volunteers to help. She hurries to the apartment, pursued by the Monsignor and the others, begins gathering her helmet and heavy jacket, the tin water bottle and hobnails, the shovel for digging through rubble.

"Jo," the Monsignor says, "you can't go out. We need to get to the basement."

She blurts at him in angry Italian. "*I morti devono seppellirsi?*" Are the dead to bury themselves?

He turns away as though slapped across the mouth.

Dogfights begin. Plane on plane, crazy loops, criss-crossing each other's contrails. Prati is ablaze. The sky bursts with gold and orange behind the domes and black steeples, already the stink of sulphur on the dew of Ash Wednesday, mingling with the confetti of blossom. Whooping loudhailers warning citizens to stay calm. *Proceed in an orderly manner.* People hurtling through the streets.

An RAF fighter crossing the sky. North-west to east, rotating on itself, corkscrewing. Faster, trailing smoke from its broken tail. Fragments dropping from the fuselage like clusters of falling stars, in its wake the pair of Messerschmitts, guns spitting. Struck, its starboard wing crumples and the plane tries to turn, opening fire on the German fighters, but they fall away to the south, the fatal damage done, anything more would be a waste of ammunition. Spinning like a dart, it lurches, nose up hard, as though headed towards the disc of the rising sun.

The black smoke clears.

The gunfire dies down.

Through the cloud, a grey parachute deploying.

"Poor bastard," Sam Derry says quietly. "He'll be target practice in a minute."

The chute like a jellyfish, bloating in drifts of breeze.

She's wondering when Derry came in, didn't notice his arrival.

Ash Wednesday in Rome.

Barely yet dawn.

Slowly, the parachute descends.

Falling he sees Rome, a misted map below him. Maze of streets, terracotta rooftiles. A God's-eye view of the thousand spires. The eggshell that is the dome of St. Peter's.

Armoured cars, prowling tanks, tiny as nursery toys on a counterpane.

The blue, winking fury of ambulance lights. An uncoiling white serpent that must be the Tiber.

Islands. A terrace. Turquoise gardens around villas.

Wind seethes in his eardrums. Stench of petrol and fear.

His heartbeat feels too heavy; slow, and overly loud; the chute puffs and flutters like a living, breathing beast above him, trying to fail and collapse, to attack him. He is thinking of his mother. Wishing he could see her a last time.

Must stay *below* the chute, don't permit it to wrap around you or you'll plummet. Like everything in the world, it yearns to fall. That is the law of gravity. Discovered by an Englishman sitting under an apple tree. Everything is an anchor, wanting to sink you. Don't let it.

Say goodbye. Say the things that never were said. Send arrows of prayer through the pink and gold sky. Maybe one of them will find a way home.

Shots pocking all around him, a bullet snaps a string. He tries to make himself small. Foetal. Attempts to swing but he's too weak to get momentum going. Reek of gunmetal on his tongue. Sting of piss between his legs.

A hundred yards away, a British airman is falling, the chute shot to pieces and ablaze. Behind that, seven others are picked off, one by one. Somehow, he makes the sign of the cross. In a lull he hears the impossible sound of one of the parachutists singing. Which couldn't happen. But it's happening.

Make yourself a difficult target, don't dangle there, unmoving. Whatever you do, don't get captured. You have no papers, no way of explaining, no words in their language.

Rome hurtling towards him now. He moves his legs as though swimming, froglike. Below him the blue-green bowers and the bursting bulbous bombs and the plumes of purple smoke and the twinkling of explosions and now the screeching carcass of the plane that carried him skyward not an hour ago as it somersaults in a scarlet fireball, smashing into what must be the gardens of the Villa Borghese, setting fire to the sun-scorched hackberries.

As he falls, he sees, below, the red mice that must be fire brigades, and he feels for the firefighters, this is terrible work, as the bombs fall around him, dropped by the Spitfires far above, with a *zip zip* pizzicato that slivers the breeze like a drummer chopping time. Bombs falling through his line of vision with a strange, hefty slowness. As though he could reach out his gauntlets and catch one.

Soon, he knows, the dizziness will put him to merciful sleep, for he is falling too fast, the chute opened late, and his heart starts to splutter, and the words of the Act of Contrition will not be squeezed from his tongue as he turns in the air, feet up, head down, wrestling with the ropes that try to tighten around his torso. Falling past the terrified seabirds.

Coughs bark from his lungs, from the pit of his guts. The Colosseum staring upward as he falls towards its maw, the russet fields of what he knows must be Lazio in the misted distance, and a bullet penetrates the ball of his thumb making him scream a profanity that only God and the seabirds are able to hear, at this height where the death angels live.

Bombs falling on Rome. Stone countenances of the prophets watch the firestorm from their plinths.

Children run through collapsing streets and cracked-apart school yards.

A church organ explodes, hurling pipes into the sky.

Trains dozing in the station are strafed in their sidings, a thousand windows shattering in a handful of seconds, parabolas of mangled tracks and burst sleepers.

A gable in Prati topples into the herb garden of a hospital. A dolphin fountain built for Nero is blown to smoking pebbles.

In Via Tasso, the Gestapo specialists flee down secret steps into the basement of the building, the former German Cultural Institute, leaving three prisoners, badly beaten. Two of them manage to escape by kicking down a locked door but it's too late for the third, who daubs in his own blood "LONG LIVE ITALY" on a wall of the cell as he dies.

In the crypt beneath St. Peter's, the Pope is consoled by the nuns who attend him. An Archbishop tries to get a primitive-looking radio going so that news of what is happening may be obtained, and news of when it might stop. So deep beneath the floor of the basilica that the sirens cannot be heard, the Pope, on his knees, starts to pray. In his mind, a Vermeer he once saw of the storm on the Sea of Galilee, the Saviour asleep in the hull as the boat bearing the disciples is smashed by the breakers. Wake up, Lord. *Wake up.*

Two cows bound for market, a rare sight in Rome nowadays, spooked by the bombs, kick loose and stampede, killing the farmer and a child of the tenements, a seven-year-old girl.

A rocket strikes an apartment block in Viale Giulio Cesare near the private clinic of an eminent surgeon, Moretti. The concierge is killed, as is a gardener who has been working in the courtyard. The surgeon saves the life of a passer-by, a young mother of three, by performing a tracheotomy on her, there in the burning street, on the steps of an ironmongery, assisted by a Roman bus conductor, while the soldiers scream at him to be gone.

A black bullet-holed Daimler with diplomatic number plates comes grumblingly to a halt outside the checkpoint leading into Vatican City.

No guards are on duty.

The heavy arrow-tipped gates padlocked.

The driver, John Trant, and bodyguard, Philip Villers, clamber out of the ponderous boat-like car and flee

across the narrow street to where a frightened man is beckoning from the entrance to a storage cellar below a row of shops that sell religious items to pilgrims.

Delia Kiernan, wife of the Irish Ambassador, will this morning leave the British Ambassador's apartment in the Vatican, where with other members of the Escape Line, including her daughter, nineteen-year-old biology student Blon, she has been holed up since Christmas morning. Safe passage has been conceded by Commander Hauptmann of the Gestapo, on the orders of Berlin, following negotiations via the Papal Curia by the Department of External Affairs in Dublin. But the arrangement cannot be carried out until the air raid has stopped for there is no one to open the gates.

Trant and Villers's task is to collect Mrs. Kiernan and her daughter and whatever of their belongings will fit into a single suitcase. They are to convey the troublemaking Kiernan females directly to the German naval base at Ostia; the windows and doors of the Daimler to remain shut throughout the journey, which will take longer than usual because of Allied bomb damage to Rome's streets. Passengers are not to be permitted to speak with any passer-by. No one else may enter the car.

A seaplane is waiting to take them and other diplomats' family members to a neutral port that will not be named, but Dublin think it might be Lisbon. Mrs. Kiernan's husband may be present on the waterfront at Ostia to bid his wife and their daughter farewell. If so, he must be accompanied by an SS observer and may not give them anything, including a Diplomatic Bag, or accept anything except a personal letter in an unsealed envelope. The Kiernans are not to embrace.

Bombs rain.

In the shelter, Trant and Villers are not looking forward to spending a two-hour drive with Delia Kiernan, who is mouthy and known to like a drop and never stops hopping the ball. They feel for her husband, a modest, somewhat dry, unassuming man who reads English detective stories and collects meerschaum pipes. Tom Kiernan is a good employer, they have always found, thoughtful in both senses, reticent, quiet. He does not deserve the merciless fate he has brought upon himself, the life sentence of those who marry Big Personalities.

"That air raid is after doing us a favour," Trant chuckles to Villers, as the thuds shake the street above them.

Villers accepts a cigarette, cups the match, glances upward.

"Look on the bright side. We might get killed."

In the L-shaped walled orchard, the fallen airman is running.

Panicked. Confused. Eyes hot.

Frightened by the rasp of his own agonised gasps.

Seagulls flap up at him from the rough bark walkways, croaking, quarrelsome, mustard-yellow beaks famished. Jeering his fear and his flightlessness.

Rain surging into the leaves.

High old walls around pear trees. He can't see a gate. But there *must* be a gate. Keep looking. No one would plant an orchard without making a way in and out. Stay calm. Remember your training. Crush the panic.

The vast lung that is his chute in the boughs of two knotted-together elms. Strings dangling. Startled wildcats on a wall.

An octagonal summer house with a pyramidal roof and scarlet-rimmed portholes, in the shadow of an overgrown weeping willow.

Sun coming up harder. Dew hazing from the grass. Church bells tolling eight. Or was it nine?

Is this orchard in a park? Someone's estate? Do not give in to confusion. Follow the plan.

The summer-house floor has been piled with hefty cardboard boxes. Those he opens contain old books. On the window ledge, a half-gone bottle of Chianti, he pulls the cork, takes a swallow, almost retches but chugs it down. A musty rotten-lemon smell mixing with the odour of the books, as though something wild lived or died here.

Prowling the wall again now, on the hunt for any gap, recollecting a decrepit grey lion he once saw when the circus came to the neighbourhood, a flat-footed, exhausted slave he and the other children felt pity for. It was shot at the close of the season.

Bricks the colour of copper. Last year's oranges in rotting heaps. The sizzling acrid sting from the wound in his hand, where he's powdered it with the regulation antiseptic from the pack they were given at base. Rubbing the grains in hard, pressing, like they've been shown to by the Sergeant Major. "Until it feels like lumps of broken glass, boys, that stuff is no use. Get it in hard. Use your thumbs. Till you're fainting."

In the faint he sees acrobats, hears the voice of his grandfather, is falling again into Rome.

The ringmaster beckons. High-stepping black ponies. When he wakes, the door is in front of him, ten yards

across the orchard—a blue-painted door, like a door in a fairy tale.

How did he fail to see it?

The sail of his chute gives a meagre, breathless puff. As though wishing him good luck. Or so he thinks.

2

10.47 HOURS

Head down, Jo steps from the news-stand where she has been pretending to read the headlines and slips into the Ash Wednesday procession as it approaches.

Scores of veiled women, mainly old, a few dozen shuffling old men. A couple of mothers with toddlers.

As they enter the street known in the Escape Line code as Via Cozzolani, the ranks are swelled by the arrival of a sodality pilgrimage from San Luigi in the mountains, carrying candles and relics, icons, draped statues, so that now the procession numbers more than five hundred, with stragglers continuing to step in.

She pulls down her widow's mantilla, moves into the centre of the ranks. Lowers her gaze as she walks.

Ave, Maria, grátia plena, Dóminus tecum.

Some processors are barefoot. Some carry ash staves.

Sancta María, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatóribus.

Lenten processions have been banned by the Gestapo, but defiant messages appeared in the newspapers of Rome. Starve us. Threaten us. Our memories are long. You will not tell us when we may pray.

A newsreel crew has set up on the corner near the gates of the market.

Two parked-up armoured cars and a long black Mercedes in need of a wash, its convertible roof open, Swastika flags on the hood.

A Gestapo informant told the Escape Line that Hauptmann would be in the Mercedes but he isn't among the trio of dark-glassed officers whose pouchy gazes watch the walkers. She doesn't want to be seen looking, stares hard at the glistening cobbles. Waits for precisely the correct moment to issue the signal—a quick tap to the top of her head.

A trashcan is thrown from a high balcony behind the armoured cars. The clash makes the Nazis turn towards it as she passes.

The holy destination is the Pantheon, then on to St. Peter in Chains.

Rolling thunder.

Sung plainchant.

Seething breeze.

Beneath her blouse, against her abdomen, a belted pouch containing ninety hundred-dollar bills.

In the Pantheon, she enters the side chapel to the right of the doors, the Cappella dell'Annunciazione, where an art conservators' screen has been erected at the base of the pillar in front of a painting, Bonzi's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. She hurries behind the screen, opens her shirt, leaves the pouch in the gap beneath the scaffolding, fixes herself, exits, crosses the vast floor. Her wristwatch tells her that the Rendimento is running three minutes behind plan. Important to get on. Must not delay.

She sees the priest enter and leave the side chapel, he touches his left earlobe; she knows he has retrieved the pouch from its hiding place beneath the scaffolding, has it now in the deep pocket of his robe as he makes his way across the eternity of damp, slippery floor, through the worshippers, towards the sacristy doors.

A gasp from the people around her.

Rain falling through the opening in the Pantheon's roof.

Cooing pilgrims gape upward, raise their faces and hands to the event.

But one man, she notices, does not raise his face.

Hauptmann.

By the altar.

Red lamp gleaming on his epaulettes.

Peaked cap low, in such a way that she cannot see his eyes, doesn't know where he's looking, what he might do next.

Standing still as a pillar.

His strange, tight smile.

A long, long moment.

He beckons.

A long-limbed woman approaches him from across the Pantheon, followed by a boy and girl, hand in hand. They embrace him; he kisses their hair. These must be his children and his wife, the former fashion model. The girl has a box camera that she holds before her waist, staring down into the lens, takes a picture of her parents and brother as they stand before the tomb of Raphael. Hauptmann wipes the little boy's nose.

A passing Commissionaire is asked to take a photograph of the family group and agrees. Commander and Frau Hauptmann, doting parents, and their beautiful children, Heinrich and Wilhelmine, enjoying a day out in Rome.

As she watches, something adheres to her lapel. A perfect white rose petal. Strange.

She enters the curtained-off Cappella di San Giuseppe da Terrasanta, tries the secret door disguised as a fresco panel in the wall behind the altar, but it hasn't been unlocked, something in the plan has gone wrong, she is trapped here.

Through a fray in the drape, she sees him.

Staring in her direction like a birdwatcher.

Raises his hands in the air.

Claps twice.

White petals come falling through the vast eye in the Pantheon's roof, a snowfall of whiteness, sweetly fragrant, floating, swirling—shaken out from muslin sacks, tossed down by gloved hands—and the people applaud delightedly, and his wife clasps his arm, and he nods with husbandly modesty, the Man Who Thought of the Perfect Gift, and their children reach up to catch the love-fall. Faster, thicker, fragrant, into whiteout. The newspapers will report that the Commander's wedding-anniversary presentation for his wife took several months of planning, the cooperation of the civic authorities, a special permit from the Mayor, the participation of the fire department's High Ladders battalion "who scaled the Pantheon's walls at great risk." Five hundred kilos of white rose petals, trucked in from rural Lazio—at the Commander's own expense, he is at pains to point out—"but worth it to celebrate the mother of my children, in a city where all children are beloved."

One reporter will dare to ask if such a gesture is appropriate on Ash Wednesday. "Some would regard it as a desecration." Hauptmann responds, with a smile that would wither a garden: "The Romans have requested me not to tell them when they may pray and make procession. I ask in return that they not tell me when I may love my wife."

Petals drift into the side chapel where the Contessa is waiting. Through the ancient planks behind the altar, she hears the scrabble as someone approaches, opens the creaking door, pulls her through.

Forty seconds later, she steps onto a streetcar. Cold air on her face as the tram jolts across Via Giustiniani.

She will not look back.

From the middle distance, gunfire.

Petals in her buttonholes and boots.

Pursuing the fallen airman, two frantic Germans. One in his teens, the other middle-aged. Machine guns jattering as they canter in his wake.

Sweat sticks the canvas shirt he stole from a clothesline to his torso. The airman's boots are too big, and mismatched, and he stumbles, hands flailing at the bullet-holed walls as he tries to get righted, but ahead of him are three arches and he doesn't know which one to take as his pained wheezes echo on stone.

Bell song for noon. A choir sings the Angelus.

The arch in the middle is darkest. Dropping his chin, he runs through. Cobbles. A little fountain. Shuttered-up shops. A streetwalker in wooden high-heeled shoes and feathered cloche hat. The rubble of a bombed-out laundry.

Ragged children in doorways hurry back into the darkness. Hungry widows in black behind moth-eaten fans. Like their quarry, the Germans are drenched in sweat and gnawed at by hunger. There will be a reward in the form of food for catching this fugitive.

What's running from them now is a meal.

Halt! call the soldiers, but the fallen airman does not stop. Now he's vaulting an overturned barrel like a clumsy-limbed hurdler, now crashing through a length of diseased hedging outside a closed trattoria, screaming for the beggars and hustlers to get out of his way, which they do, but unbothered, at their own gloomy pace, for the sight of a terrified man running from soldiers has become an hourly occurrence in Rome and interfering could get you gunned down.

His face is bleeding now, slashed to flitters by the hedge. The too-big canvas shirt in damp tatters. The

airman runs, spluttering, for a steep flight of steps, at the top of which is a Piazza Cavour—so the signpost for tourists proclaims—but now he hears the Germans gaining and cursing and calling, and he bevels into a shadowy back street of high, narrow, pockmarked buildings that look like they might be warehouses.

A burnt-out Panzer III. Bullets spit at his back. No one can outrun a bullet but trying to do so was part of his training. He jinks, ducks, like a dribbling footballer, past the wall-high mural of a scowling, arms-folded Mussolini splattered with slops of red paint.

A magenta-haired, high-cheekboned woman smoking in the doorway of a bridal shop sees him coming and mashes her cigarette out with her shoe. Large-eyed. Purple-lipped. She might be thirty. Long Roman nose. Like a movie actress whose name he can't remember now.

She beckons.

Her hauteur, like the beauty of something becoming extinct. On her forehead, an ashen cross.

He stills, uncertain, as a sailor glimpsing an island that isn't marked on the charts. Behind him the boot-steps louden.

She steps forward, takes his elbow, pulls him into the shop—the ting as the clouded glass door closes behind them—chivvying him past the counter, by the quintet of mannequins and the charcoal-sketched bridesmaids, past the racks of ivory gowns and the shelves of lacework peignoirs, to the throughway that turns out to contain the changing cubicles.

Turning, he sees the Germans dart past in the narrow street. She shoves him into the middle cubicle of three, puts a finger to her lips for silence, leaves him.

The pain in the ball of his left thumb, pulsing across his whole hand as though conducted by the tributaries of the palm. He wants to cry out. If only he could scream.

He can hear, in the cubicle next to him, two women speaking quietly, and he wishes he knew Italian—any Italian at all. Tries to quieten down his breathing. Counts to ten. Counts to thirty. Something the Sergeant told them in training comes to him out of the numbers—make a list of what you have, don't think about what you haven't. Include what you're wearing. Count everything. Dagger. Biscuit. Magnetised razor blade. Binoculars. Boots. Trousers. Pullover. Undershorts. Vest. Socks. Locket. Religious medal on chain. Sachet of antiseptic powder, almost empty.

If the very worst happens and you are compelled to abandon your aircraft, destroy the craft if you can. Don't get captured.

The women in the next cubicle, speaking cartoonishly now, as though imitating some preposterous bore who talked down to them. From out in the shop, the redolence of perfumes that reek of their costliness, of overtures and gemstones, of orchid corsages, scents in the key of dark blue; from somewhere above him, the clank of a toilet flushing and the bored, forced sing-song of a child. Pain tendrils around his wrist, a tight bracelet of broken glass. The drenched shirt plastered to his back.

Water. The shock of thirst. Anything for water.

He risks a glance beyond the cubicle, into the body of the shop. The sight meeting him is so appalling he tells himself he can't be seeing it. On the smooth, mahogany floorboards, by the mannequins and racks, a spill of blood-drops left by his thumb.

Weak now. Dizzy. He sits back on the banquette. After-images pulsing. Retinas blip. His reflection like the ghost of his own dead grandfather, like a starved but living spirit staring back at him from the strange country of mirrorland. The ghosts of all the thousands of brides who ever looked in that mirror, now lining up to weep at what is about to happen.

The ting of the bell on the shop's front door.

The staccato yap of angry German from out front.

He hears her arguing with the soldiers, not taking any guff from them. She is raising her imperious voice, interrupting their every utterance, riding over them in furious and seething Italian—"*Questo è un posto di donne! Voi uomini siete ignoranti e maleducati!*"—but their barks are coming closer to the cubicles.

As the soldiers advance steadily through the barricade of her indignance, the two women from the booth beside him swish back the ringed curtain and emerge. A twenty-year-old bride-to-be, in ivory stockings and a slip, and her mother, pearled ballgown in hands. The Germans try to apologise, now all three women are scolding and barracking.

"*Non hai una ragazza? Non hai una moglie? Vergognatevi!*"

But the older of the men refuses to be barred.

Pushing forward, shrugging off the women, he comes to the middle cubicle. Unlike the two stalls on either side, this one has a door, not curtains, a slatted, wooden door painted white with scrolls of silver flowers and Cupids. He looks frightened. Shouts unsteadily, "Hands up."

No answer.

"Last chance," he calls, "there are women here. Come out."

Silence.
He cocks his Luger.
“I warned you,” he mutters. Blams a shot through the cubicle door.
Kicks away the shattered planks.
No one inside.
In the crawlspace above, the fallen airman, unmoving. Roosting like a witch among rafters.

3

The Voice of Delia Kiernan
8th January 1963
From transcript of BBC research interview, reel 2, questions inaudible, conducted White City, London

The Choir wasn't singing, that Ash Wednesday in Rome. A bit bloodied and fagged out. Wall-fallen. Browned off. Whatever esprit de corps we had was gone walkies.

Relieved to be this side of the grass after all the danger we were after going through since the Rendimento we ran on Christmas Eve '43. But life was hard in Rome in early '44. You'd bombs. Starvation. People disappearing in a finger-snap. Someone you were after seeing this morning would be thin air tonight. The body never found. No funeral. Whispers that the Germans were after painting their warplanes in Allied colours, bombing the civilian neighbourhoods, dropping undercover agents by parachute. Moles. Plants. False flag operations. Spies.

Rumours of these strange viruses everywhere you turned. A rake of these queer new sicknesses that left you breathless, exhausted, confused, or caused hair loss or women's problems, and, in men, impotence.

A disease the Nazis were after inventing in a lab and releasing. A virus Aryans were supposed to be immune from, did you ever hear such bloody nonsense? Or only the Gestapo had the vaccine.

"Nazi-itis," the Romans called it. Or "Syndrome PH," from the initials of that hoor's melt, Head-the-Ball Hauptmann, who spread the rumours of the virus every time he got half the chance. The Italians have a great word, "*furbo*," meaning sly. That was one cur was *furbo* to his fingertips.

Oh, he wouldn't be exactly *denying* the rumours, don't you see, but making out he'd nothing to say about them. "I couldn't possibly comment on secret weapons employed by the Reich." That sort of crack. One cunning thug.

Utter bullshite, obviously, the symptoms of Nazi-itis were all symptoms of starvation and anxiousness, nothing more. But easy saying that now; at the time you didn't know. So, you'd to put on the armour, just to haul yourself through the day. But putting on the armour is a weight in itself. It's not everyone is able to carry it.

To be honest, in the Choir, we had a virus all our own. We were sick of the sight of each other.

Enzo Angelucci, a rock of strength, had gone back to his family. His wife was after being on at him, sending in letters about the kids. And I only realised after he was gone, the way he kept us together. No offence to my comrades, every one of whom I loved more than all the others put together, but Enzo was that greatest of miraculous creatures: an everyday, working-class, salt-of-the-earth Roman. Our ship lost a mainsail when he went.

Hugh was gone a bit semi-detached. Towards the end of February he started spending more time back in his room in the Collegio Teutonico. Lent was coming and he felt it a time for a priest to be praying in silence, not gallivanting around saving the world. He'd visit us, still, the odd day, but even present was a bit absent. I think the noise of the place got him down.

You'd half a dozen of us living in three tiny rooms and a kitchenette at Frank Osborne's apartment like a dosshouse. The lads in one bunkroom, the women in the other—cells more than bedrooms, a monk would have thought them poky—then, a sitting room the size of a hanky, that was also Frank's office. Wasn't space to swing a cat. You couldn't think.

No privacy. Stale air. Perpetual eczema from chalky water. Shutters open at night, so you'd be demented with the midges. Doors slamming through your dreams. Jumpy alarm clocks. Owls, wooing. The building housed all the embassies of countries that retreated into the Vatican. We'd our own gated corridor, on the third storey of four, but the racket through the floorboards and ceilings was like something out of the Tower of Babel. Cubans above you, Bolivians below. Lovely people. Wouldn't be the quietest.

And your fears. You'd be afraid. Fear is bodily.

It's why we have singing. Because that's bodily, too. I can never seem to explain it to young people who weren't there at the time. It's the body consoles the mind, not the other way about. The mind is only a principality of the body.

We'd all of us gippy tummy and chestiness, as a lot of the escapees had. Jo, God bless her, used to mutter in her sleep—you'd be awake to the dawn with the effort of not listening. Marianna grinding her teeth or tapping on the accursed typewriter in the alcove. The lads, across the hall, talking, or up all hours playing cards. Also, it was a workplace, HQ for the Choir. So, notebooks and papers, and maps taped to the windows, and squiggles up and down the wallpaper, in some crazy kind of code, and sketches, and scribbles, and names and addresses. Like living inside Hugh O'Flaherty's brain. The place would be throbbing with facts.

You'd awaken and think, Holy Mother, not again. That anxious, you'd be ageing in dog years. Hugh pacing, the grim auld face of him, and the horn-rim specs. John May sullen as buggery and smoking the roll-ups when his supply of Lucky Strikes ran down. Or tootling on the wretched saxophone till you'd want to brain him with it, or plunking on this bockety old mandolin he was after finding and was trying to learn. My daughter, Blon, in a mood as long as your arm; you know what they're like at that age. As for Derry, the decentest man that ever donned a shoe, the strain was beginning to tell. He was after commandeering the only table we had for a war model he was putting together, a huge thing, with all the Roman avenues and side streets, or as many as he could get into it. It scared me to look at it. Something obsessive going on. Not codding you, he'd stare at it two hours. A notion was after possessing him like a demon and wouldn't let him go—that the Jerries were trying to infiltrate us, using spies masquerading as Books.

Johnny May had some means he never went into of getting blackmarket drink and smokes. But food was another matter. You wouldn't think to look at me now but there were days I went hungry like the rest of us. Even in the Vatican, there'd be shortages aplenty. And by God, you'd be hungry. Till it chewed at your mind. You'd ate a beggarman's bundle off the end of his stick. Poor Derry trying to buck you up with the stiff upper lip. "Good for our waistlines, Delia. No one ever died of hunger."

I said, "Easy knowing you're not Irish, saying that." He'd go quiet.

Frank Osborne hanging like a bat from this exercise bar he was after putting up in the hallway outside the apartment. Doing, what do you call them, callisthenics. Knee-raises. Pull-ups. Banging on a boxing bag hooked from the ceiling. The sweat dripping off him and it plopping onto the terracotta. He'd be singing you songs he was making up in the style of his adored Noël Coward.

> "In a Vatican attic, I cocktailed,
> Whilst sipping the finest frizzante.
> The cardinal torqued with the Bishop of York,
> And the choirboys uncorked the Chianti."

Hugh, when he visited, would be bossing you around. Do this. Do that. Some of his remarks could be a bit steel-toe. He wouldn't be behind the door in even telling you what to wear. I remember this warm day, I had on me a summer frock I got one time for the beach at Ostia. It was nothing Folies Bergère, but it was cut above the knee and an inch off the shoulder. My Nabs beckons me over, expression like blue bloody thunder on his mush.

"Delia," says he. "Too much meat."

A good man, Hugh, but schoolmasterly, a bit removed. There were days he'd sink the heart in your chest till you'd feel it like a snooker ball falling down stairs.

Then, sometimes, you'd have an escapee kipping on the sitting room floor. When we'd nowhere else to put them, or a safehouse hadn't been got for them yet, or they were after pitching up like a bad dream in the middle of the night. You'd pootle in for whatever morsel or cuppa was available and trip over some fella you'd never laid eyes on. From anyplace in half the world, you mightn't even know his language. South Africa, Stoke-on-Trent. Nowheresville Dakota, County Down. Fella you never seen in your natural life, and you wafting about in the curlers, and he lying there watching it happen. Like an emperor on a chaise longue, only in socks, jocks, and dog-tags. I ask you. Wouldn't mind if any of them were worth looking at. But I don't remember Clark Gables. One or two of them, how will I put it, sticking up for more than their principles. I wouldn't be long telling them, "Put your blanket back over yourself there, love, I've seen more muscle on a chip."

And they horsing down the scran, every last scrap in the place. They'd ate the leg of the lamb of God. One Durham fecker the size of a carthorse asks me one morning, "You wouldn't have an artichoke, pet? Only I hear they're flippin' lovely." Says I, "I'll artichoke you in a minute. With my foot up your hole."

Well, you knew it would have to stop.

Negotiations the length of your life were after taking place to get Blon and yours truly out of the Vatican.

The thing would need to be choreographed. Fair enough.

Officially we were wanted by the Jerries for questioning about the mission the Escape Line was after running on Christmas Eve, when a certain someone left money for the escapees in three drops around the city. I didn't deny or confirm that I'd something to do with it, but I insisted Blon was innocent, anything she might have done was her mother's fault. Which made Blon hit the roof with me. We'd a blazing row. She was proud of her involvement, didn't want excuses made. "How dare you bloody speak for me? You know nothing about how I feel." Anyhow, there it was and I'll say no more on family matters. Story for another time.

The dogs in the street knew who'd been behind the gig that Christmas Eve night, but Hauptmann and his sleeveens hadn't proof. Being a diplomatic spouse might get me off the hook. I would make no specific admission, but "general conversations could be had" was how Dublin put it. I believe the thing was brokered through the Swiss. You didn't ask.

The proposed Step One was for me to express penitence for what I was after doing to assist the Escape Line. This I refused to do, point blank. Well, you'd never have a minute's luck if you told such a barefaced lie. I wasn't one bit penitent. I was glad. You are talking to no saint, of that I may assure you, but I was raised by decent parents not to kick people when they're down. The unfortunates getting walked on in Rome were the people I stood for. What I did wasn't enough. But I did it.

Dictionaries were got out and thesauruses consulted. Would I apologise? Ask my hat. Express contriteness? I would in my hoop. Might I be able to say that I "regretted" aspects of my involvement? I agreed that I would be *able* to, in the muscular sense. Would we settle on "regret," so? If we must.

Well, there *were* moments of regret, like in anything else, and those were what I regretted. You could win the moon in a raffle and regret you didn't win the stars. If they wanted a drop of the Jesuitical, I could pour it.

A paper was drawn up, which I was invited to sign. "Understand," says I to the civil servant from the Curia, a Belgian priest he was, "that I make these ink marks on this parchment with which you have furnished me—" I was trowelling it on thick, you know, that unnerves them a bit, to see a woman well able to talk the hoity-toity rubbish they talk themselves—"because I am required to do so in order to leave Vatican City. Those marks are not my signature and they do not convey my assent." But he was skilled in a thing that is highly valued by the Princes of the Roman Catholic Church: looking through you like you were furniture. Or weather.

Next, a certain Cardinal who shall remain nameless—I had avoided him across a crowded room at official receptions and the like—was tasked to summons me formally and administer a dressing-down. A thing he liked doing, especially if the muggins on the receiving end was a female. Not that he was fussy, was the rumour.

The meeting would take place in the former sacristy at the pilgrim house, I was informed by the Belgian. My admonisher, the Cardinal, would put questions and preach before me for twenty minutes, during which I would kneel.

"Stand in by the ditch a minute now," says I. "I will what?"

I explained in blunt terminology that the latter aspect of what was proposed would not be happening. I am Delia Murphy-Kiernan from Claremorris, County Mayo. My people kneel before Almighty God. No one else.

A compromise was arrived at: I would be seated on one side of a table, the Cardinal on the other.

I was to wear a hat throughout the encounter.

"Just a hat?" says I.

That one was let go.

I would dress modestly, covering my upper arms and bosom in the presence of His Eminence. I would not offer to shake his hand or attempt to touch him in any way. I confirmed that I would do my best not to fling myself upon him no matter the temptation. The hem of my skirt or dress—no trousers—would come to below the knee. Obligatory stockings. No make-up. Conservative shoes.

I was hardly going to shimmy up in the girdle and pumps but the poor gobdaw from the Curia, whose likeable side I was starting to see, insisted. Every condition must be agreed in advance, including the sartorial.

Diplomacy is a great thing altogether.

On and on went the nonsense like bells for a dirge. No jewellery apart from my wedding ring but I could carry a set of rosary beads. Gloves, if worn, must have fingers, not be mittens. Nail polish would be punishable by firing squad. When selecting my outfit, the colour red should be avoided.

Well, I wouldn't want to clash with His Eminence, I confirmed.

The great day came anyway. Ash Wednesday morning. There'd been an air raid just after dawn, a bad one, that would put the fear of God in you. I wasn't in good form, and the weather was blazing, and I sweating like a sow in a sauna.

Cardinal Whatyoumacall was well known in Rome as a stern, penanceloving sort, used to whip himself of an evening, and I'd say there'd be a long queue if he let someone else do it. In he stalks, anyhow, face long as a February funeral and a list of my crimes in a copybook. Along with him, a nun from a silent order, who would

bear witness to our tête-à-tête and compile a solemn memorandum for the Pope. Who would throw it in the wastepaper basket.

Was it true I was after helping Allied escapers and Jews and this, that and the other, and he talking to me like the *Titanic* to the iceberg. At first, I kicked for touch because annoying him was giving me a sort of glee, God forgive me. But after a while I started answering with a bit more directness. The longing was on me to get this done and go home.

Had I compromised the Vatican policy of neutrality?

Yes.

Had I got myself entangled with an undesirable lot?

Tick.

Had I failed to reflect on my duty as a diplomat's spouse?

By now I was getting miffed, but he wouldn't take the hint. What he was saying about spousal inadequacy was starting to give me the hump. It was pushing too far. The red mist came down. Here's this celibate—so-called—giving me sermons on wifeliness and I married twenty years. Like a hippopotamus giving you lectures on tiddlywinks.

"Mrs. Kiernan," says he, the jumped-up bum, "I have to tell you that your actions are not those of a good Catholic woman and wife."

"Is that right, Your Eminence?" says I.

"Alas, yes."

"Your Eminence," says I. "You should not talk to me like that."

Well, the look on his face would stop clocks.

I stood up, lit a cigarette, which you didn't do in the presence of a Cardinal. Then I took a step forward and stared him in the eye of his eye.

Says I: "I am a Catholic, Your Eminence, and all belonging to me were Catholics and it's many of them died in chains rather than renege on their religion."

"I—"

"Question my faith ever again, and you'll be a long time regretting it."

Lick that ice cream for a while, I said to him in my head.

"This meeting has concluded," I told him.

Out with me to the hall and I calling for the driver we were after summoning from the embassy, John Trant, who'd been left waiting an age outside. I was dying to go, for I was sick of the Choir. It wasn't right for Blon to be living the way we were, she needed to be with her friends, not bunking in some kip with her mam. We weren't getting along as a mother and daughter should. Our rows were worsening—harsh words were spoken. And I missed my husband, Tom, and the simpler life we had. It would be at me in the night that I might start up my singing career again when the war was over. That maybe it wasn't too late.

You'd be going through songs in your head, like the songs were your stepping-stones. Because a song is a strong companion when you're troubled in the night. A song will stand at your door and push monsters away. A song will be your lamplighter. And your truth.

In comes Trant, the embassy chauffeur, a decent enough skin—"It's yourself, Mrs. Kiernan, grand to see you again"—and with him a mammal called Villers, the greatest halfwit I ever met in Rome, which, believe me, is saying something.

"Boys," says I. "I need a dig-out fetching a fierce heavy suitcase up from the cellar, would you mind, it's all Blon's books for university?" Down they toddle without ado, and I bolted the cellar door behind them.

Then out to the Daimler, and I waving my hanky in farewell up at Jo Landini and D'Arcy in the window, and Hugh giving me a blessing as we went.

Let's just say, the man that drove Blon and me out of the Vatican that Ash Wednesday morning was an escaped Battery Quartermaster Sergeant of the Transvaal Horse Artillery, whose name I don't recall, and the fella letting on to be the legation bodyguard was a Canadian tailgunner with halitosis that would drop the other fella's horse. In the boot was a chap called Alf "Buzzer" Buckley, a Captain of the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers. If I was leaving the Vatican anyway, I'd be damn sure to take a few escapees with me.

You don't tell Delia Kiernan what to be at, *mein Schatz.*

We drove straight to the embassy—buggeration to Ostia—where I told Tom he'd have to let us in, or I'd apply to come in as a refugee, and he'd need to think of the sport all the barstool philosophers would have back in Dublin when they heard of a wife claiming political asylum off her husband. That was that.

The three escapees I smuggled out disappeared into Rome. I was told later that they formed a sabotage squad, with the local partisans, to help the Allied advance, but I never heard from any of them again.

And after I left the Vatican, I continued to work as best I could for the Choir. But there was a limit to what I could do. It wouldn't have been fair on Tom.

Still, I think it was useful, having someone on the outside. Which we'd always had in greater Rome. The chorus, if you like. You couldn't run the Choir if you hadn't.

But there were cracks, little spats. Different aims bubbling up. German conscripts in recent weeks were after beginning to desert in greater numbers. Some of us were for giving them a hand to safety. Others weren't. You'd whispers that the Allies were steadily fighting their way up from Sicily but other rumours that the Jerries were about to bomb Rome and the Vatican to rubble. It's often said that the troubles of wartime bring people together. In the Choir, they started pushing us apart.

I remember thinking, what we need is something simple and straightforward to put us all on the one road again. Well, in a sense, that was coming. Fallen out of the sky. But be careful what you pray for. You might get more than you expected. We didn't know it yet—didn't even know his name—but one particular airman who was after descending into Rome would wreak havoc before he was done. For us all.

4

THURSDAY 24TH FEBRUARY 1944

In her cluttered apartment above the bridal shop, she does her best to clean his wounds, but his pain is so severe that he flinches, muttering, from her touch. The living room shimmers. She scolds him as she works. The little girl in the corner watches, clutches a teddy bear, says nothing.

A sewing machine near the window. A small upright piano in the alcove. Scrolls of white and ivory satin, spools of thread, books of patterns. A desk calendar showing the feast days of the saints.

On the piano a framed photograph of his rescuer, chin raised, smiling. In her arms a blanketed baby who must be the little girl. A soldier in Italian infantry uniform stands stiffly behind them, near umbrella-like Roman pines and a fountain of Triton.

She brings the airman polenta, which he dislikes, and water, which he craves. Clear, cold, faintly slate-tasting water. Never in his twenty-eight years has he been riven by such thirst.

On Friday morning, the feast of St. Walpurga, she gives him a segment of blueish-greenish lemon, indicating he's to put it into the water. Somehow this works, the thirst disappears.

That night, he hears her weeping and trying to console the sleepless child. It's like trying to placate rain. You can't do it.

Overhead the bombers and their fighter escorts drone. Something terrible about hearing her pray.

On her knees, the beads in pale candlelight, the adjurations of what must be the rosary. The child won't join in, despite the mother's cajoling. Reddish gold flashes on the windowpane.

On Saturday, she tries insisting in mime that he take the double bed in her room, but he won't, he shakes his head, the bare floor by the sewing machine is fine. Sighing, she drops the subject. It becomes a sort of game between them.

She points to the bed.

He refuses.

She shrugs.

There are men's clothes in her wardrobe—pleated suits, linen shirts—and cufflinks in the wardrobe drawer, and a packet of French letters, and tiepins and a medal of the Virgin and a velvet-backed shaving brush that looks as though it has never been used—but the soldier in the photograph on the piano never appears. Perhaps he is fighting in the war. Or has left her. Or is dead. She seems appallingly young to be a widow.

On Monday morning she descends to the shop, leaving him alone with the child, who reads or draws pictures in a jotter. Sometimes the sound of the till comes up through the floorboards with the chirk and Vesuvian fire of Italian conversation. You can picture her waving her hands, rolling her eyes, you don't need to see.

"Elena," the child says that afternoon, pointing to herself.

"Bruno," he replies. "I, Bruno."

"Bruto?"

"*Bruno*."

He points to the photograph of her mother.

"Mama," the child says.

"No. You *Elena*. I *Bruno*. She?"

"Giuseppina."

He scrawls a cartoon for Elena in her jotter, an elephant in ballet shoes with a fancy umbrella crossing a tightrope, but she makes no response, it's as though she can't see it. Then, a cartwheeling clown. Which makes her chuckle. He wishes she would laugh oftener; her cold-eyed seriousness unnerves him. She slouches about the apartment, a perpetually frightened watchfulness in her stare. Scolding her crayons as she arranges them, saying the colours aloud.

"*Verde*."

"*Arancione*."

"*Azzurro*."

German soldiers in the street below—he learns that the colour of their tunics is "*grigio*"—kick down a door near the corner leading to what he thinks is an alleyway. A teenaged boy is dragged out, the woman weeping behind him is shot. The soldiers don't even wait. Leave her body on the pavement.

The colour of blood is "*rosso*."

Neighbours hurry down, in frightened twos and threes. A sheet is draped over her face while they wait for the priest, an old man with white eyebrows, who doesn't stay long before hastening away.

The child watches. Says nothing.

Her mother comes up from the shop, dark streaks on her cheekbones where mascara has run. Makes dinner as though nothing has happened. Scrags of meat boiled yesterday for soup.

Afterwards she pours a glass of wine, plays a few disconsolate chords on the piano. Looks at him from across the room.

In his blankets on the floor by the window, he listens as she sings very quietly—the child has gone to bed without her mother noticing. He wants to tell her he knows the piece, his grandfather at home used to sing it despite never understanding the words.

"Caro mio ben
Credimi almen
Senza di te
Languisce il cor"

He wants to join her in singing the lyric, or just humming along with her, but is afraid, as though he might disturb something he doesn't understand, and by the time he has summoned his courage, it's too late, she has moved from the room.

So quiet, he can hear the swish as her clothes touch the bedroom floor.

Giuseppina.

The melody was written a long time ago by a man named Giordani, his grandfather once told him. A beautiful name, like an ice cream flavour. Or a wine. Or the fruit in the Garden of Eden. Because the Bible never told us it was an apple on that tree, Grandfather pointed out. All it said was that to taste it was forbidden.

The stories Grandfather knew. The poems, the plays. Shakespeare his hero, the godly soliloquies translated into a hundred languages, "even our own." Loved to quote *Hamlet*, adored the smoky darkness of *Macbeth*: "Let us seek out some desolate shade and there weep our sad bosoms empty." The nicotine burr of his voice.

Bruno is walking through a walled orchard where the branches hang so low that they touch the grass. Hefty with fruits, golden, luscious, ripe. A radiance around each of them, like an angel's halo. *Giordani*, he knows they are called.

As he reaches up to pluck one, nectar trickling on his fingertips and shot-through left hand, he realises—but he doesn't mind—that he is dreaming. He hopes it is one of those dreams you can pilot like a plane.

Next morning, she looks at him assessingly across the rim of her coffee cup. The coffee is made of ground acorns and barley. He feels she can see into him. As though she knows about his dream, and how it ended.

She goes out to early Mass for First Friday with the child. He watches from the window as they hurry down the street as though spooled in by the peal of the bells. The airraid siren sounds while they're gone but no bombs come. On other days, bombs have come but no siren. He worries when she and the child go out. Then worries when they return home. There isn't a bomb shelter. Could he dig one? But that would take a week and his muscles feel like water. In a dream, Grandfather comes to him, on a stage lit by candles.

Awakening, he sees a frock-coated man, doctor's leather bag in hand. A small fellow, portly, with shining black shoes and a face dignified by a moustache he must take a lot of care of, like whiskers in an illustrated Dickens. "Dottore Dallorso," Giuseppina tells him, "*un amico*"—the word the weird little girl often uses for a being she sees in the mirror over the fireplace.

"Bruno—" she points into the looking-glass—"*il mio amico*."

He has deciphered that the word means either "Satan" or "my friend." Dallorso plumps the cushions, indicates that Bruno is to lie down on the sofa, flat and still, don't move. With his hand, he traces a sombre, steady, unremitting line parallel to the floor. Takes his pulse, counting quietly at the ceiling, now listening with an overly cumbersome stethoscope, glancing from time to time at an old-fashioned, too-large, cricket-clicking fob watch that is like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*. He addresses questions to the patient in strafes of choppy, brisk Italian, despite knowing that the patient speaks none of that language and is unable to answer. Takes a thermometer from the bag, indicates that it's to be placed beneath the tongue. All the while, he is eyeing the gash in the patient's left hand, with a darkly meaning look that might be recognition of an old

enemy. The sight of it makes him fall silent.

He whispers to Giuseppina. One word is "*ospedale*," another is "*chirurgia*." She shrugs, shakes her head. "*Impossibile*."

The child bounces a tennis ball against the flank of the piano. From the cupboard beneath the sink, her mother pulls a tin of grit used to scour floors.

Dallorso unfastens his belt, hands it to the patient and mimes: *Bite on it. Like this*, his teeth like old piano keys, cracked, the colour of parchment. He shakes the scouring grit into his palm, rubs it hard into the wound.

The room sparkles red with raw pain.

Nothing but russet liquid rust and chunking scutter comes from the heavy brass taps in the kitchen. But at dawn on the feast day of St. Casimir Jagiellon, she brings him *una fiaschetta*—a flask—of the cold, clean, slate-tasting water, with a wedge of lemon and a rosemary sprig, and a bowl—*una ciotola*—of hot water and a razor.

A long time since he last shaved. The feeling is strange. Like apprehending for the first time that you own something called skin, that it contains you in the way that a bottle shapes air.

A facecloth she uses to wipe off blusher.

Cigarette butts in a saucer.

Blunted lipsticks.

He realises there is a well at the end of the little octagonal courtyard behind the building. No wall around it, not a fairy-tale well or a lychgate in one of Grandfather's old books, no bucket on a pulley for a princess to winch up a frog, just a star-shaped hole through black slates. As though someone stamped hard through them in hefty hobnails, knowing water was below if only you stamped hard enough. Because water is below everything if you stamp hard enough. Suddenly, he realises why their water tastes of slate.

For two days he has a strange fever; its fire is so intense that the toothpaste she has given him seems to burn his gums. There is a fan on the table in the living room, a pompous little pope that could slowly move its disapproving head west to east, and back again, but the electricity has been disconnected—she makes the throat-cut gesture when he asks her—and spiderwebs have appeared between its blades. The child grows surly and vengefully tearful; her mother sometimes shouts, one day she smashes a clock.

He wishes there was something he could fix for them. But the clock is too much.

Cogs, screws, ratchets. He can't.

They stare at him from the kitchen table.

He abandons the habit of the early-morning shave. He's not in the barracks any more. No one cares. Leaves it until he has heard the bells tolling eleven from the parish church, it must be, whose narrow, threadbare steeple you can see from the window if you stand on tiptoe so hard that it hurts.

The child asks with her eyes what he is looking at; Bruno beckons, lifts her up. As though coaxed by whatever words she is saying, or her tone, or both, the horse-shaped weathervane spins.

"*Un amico*," she says.

"*Sì, Elena. Un amico.*"

The whirr of her mother's sewing machine is oddly pleasing in the evenings, its trundling, truckling, steady-rolling steadiness as she works. The coax of her foot on the cast-iron pedal, long fingers moving swiftly as displaced air.

The way she tuts in clucked exasperation when something goes wrong. ("*Madonna mia*.") Then, the glance she sends gliding like a paper plane across the hot room to him at such moments.

She holds up before him a wedding dress, the loveliest garment that he has ever set eyes on. So beautiful he can *see* the bride wearing it, as she waltzes with her groom. Azure and golden threads in the bodice of swansdown. Veils of shimmered gossamer. Lining of porcelain tulle. The collar like the froth on a cup of cappuccino, the mother-of-pearl cuff buttons the lustrous moonlight over Parioli. Rome, in a ballgown. So gorgeous you'd want to cry.

How could that glory have been made in this unprepossessing room reeking of old carpet and decaying floorboards?

If it were a flag, he'd salute.

Who wouldn't serve that republic?

A hundred pearls in its hems; ten thousand moonstones in its neckline, a million mothwings in the gem-studded skirts.

He's not an idiot, he knows the gems are only cheap rhinestones, the diamonds are paste.

Who cares?

Pins in her mouth as she holds it aloft like the marvellous shroud in which a sainted empress ascended to

paradise.

Christ, look at it.

Nothing you could say to it with words, only in the intonation of your voice, pushing along meaning like a train.

My God, what skill.

My *God*, what skill.

My God, *what* skill.

My God, what *skill.*

He helps her wind thread. Oil the wheel. Sort her pattern books. The drawings are a fascination to him, like a planetarium ceiling or the notebooks of Galileo. He wishes he could say it in Italian.

There is a moment while spooling threads when their fingertips briefly touch.

Next morning as the bells toll eleven, she places an object on the table between them.

The velvet-backed shaving brush from her husband's wardrobe drawer.

The following day, he takes the bucket from under the sink, gesturing that he would like to go to the well for her and Elena, would like to perform at least this little act by way of daily gratitude. It is not a woman's work to heft heavy buckets up and down stairs, he mimes. Her blush sparks a guffaw from the child.

Every morning he fills a pail, every noon, every sundown. The courtyard smells of lilacs and jasmine. Strange, he can't see the plants. Perhaps in the yard of a neighbour, from across a wall.

Pigeons on the rooftops. Bees and white butterflies in the nettle bush. He tries to catch a butterfly for Elena, cupping the laughably impossible thing in his hands, thinking of how you have to light upon the right word when it flits up at you but not damage it. A word can be fragile as moth dust, and then it won't fly. But she waves for him to stop, the imprisonment isn't something she wants to see.

"Bruno, *no*!"

The toilet needs to be fixed, he tightens and refloats the ballcock. He tidies Giuseppina's books, which are old and very beautiful. She must have inherited them from someone. Maybe the soldier in the photograph, or his family.

She and the child have been going short on food since his arrival. It occurs to him that if he dug a little patch, over there near the clothesline, he could plant beans, a few potatoes. Help her hang out the laundry. Fetch water every day.

Protect her and Elena. When he's stronger, dig a shelter. Teach the child to draw. Sing "*Caro Mio Ben*."

On the night of the feast of St. Mary of Seyne, the bells ring for eight o'clock. He is at the well, wooden bucket in hand. The pail is so full that the water slops on the slates and into the parched brown grass that is starting to grow there, when he hears a man's voice from the apartment.

Through the window, the soldier he saw in the photograph on her piano. But no longer in the military uniform he is wearing in the picture. In the black of the Fascist police.

The child clinging to his thighs, welcoming home Daddy. Her mother, face grey with stunned shock.

For hours, Bruno waits, outside on the street, in the darkness of shop doorways, looking up at the moon. Close to midnight she comes to him. Tells him with frightened eyes that he needs to be gone. Find some place he can disappear to. Some desolate shade.

Hands him an old jacket and a cluster of banknotes.

Turns. Hurries back to the shop.

As he leaves, white mannequins watching, not wanting them to see him weep.

Bees and black butterflies.

Burnt trees.

Lie low a thousand years. Disappear into Rome.

He dons the threadbare jacket. Walks on.

Act II
The Fugitives

5

Friday 10th March 1944

In a stream near the prisoner-of-war camp at Passo Corese, three American inmates are working.

Robert Weldrick, Sonny Miles, Anthony Russo.

Last September they walked free from a concentration prison in Lazio when Italy changed sides in the war. The local guards shed their sweaty uniforms and returned home. A thousand men fled through a gap cut into the barbed-wire stockade, broke into threes and fours, set out with compasses and whatever food and weaponry could be found.

Weldrick chose Russo to go with him. Russo chose Miles. The three had crewed tanks in North Africa.

For two months they hid in the mountains, but winter stalked like a wolf. When the German recapture patrol found them, they were frostbitten and starving, trying to shelter in the ruins of an aqueduct. The Wehrmacht Sergeant was for abandoning them, it was his men who persuaded him to take them into custody at Passo Corese—his men were frontliners themselves, might one day face imprisonment, it didn't do to anger the battlefield gods and arouse them to vengeance.

Somehow, the trio survived.

The New Year came in.

Early in January, a tunnel beneath the kitchen block was discovered. Prisoners were told that they must inform on the perpetrators, or every inmate at Passo Corese would face the harshest consequences. Despite the warning, no one informed.

There followed beatings, loss of rations, threats of execution. When that didn't succeed, forced labour.

Some are tasked with the rebuilding of walls or the digging of graves, the painting of armoured cars in camouflage livery for the approach of spring. Weldrick, Russo, and Miles get the cleaning detail.

Slopping out latrines, unblocking the makeshift sewer. Every day they are trucked from the camp to do exterior works: nailing up barbed-wire pickets, whitewashing pillars, repainting warning signs in the forest.

Today their order is to clear the strange moss that, for months, has been clogging up the stream: purple, wispy clumps of it—the farmers call it "clown hair"—blocking the pipe that leads to the fountain in the village, souring the water's taste and instilling it with a terrible, rancid stench from which even the wild boars slink.

Miles and Weldrick have strong stomachs, don't too much mind the work. Russo pauses sometimes to vomit.

Slash-hooks, rakes, sickles, buckets. They shovel the weed into hip-high mounds which, once dried, they burn. You need to tie a kerchief around your mouth and nose.

A March rainstorm comes but the stink hangs in the air, unkillable.

It is whispered among the prisoners that the Allies have landed at Anzio, or further up the coast, or to the east. At roll call the Kommandant denies it. Paying attention to this Communist tittle-tattle will worsen their imprisonment here, by raising false expectations.

"There is no Allied invasion. It is BBC propaganda. The Axis led by Germany is winning the war. If you comply, you will be given no trouble. I have a pleasant surprise. You are to be permitted a bar."

A what?

"Yes, I will permit you a bar in Hut Three. Work you do here in the camp will be remunerated from now on; you will receive beer, cigarettes, a gramophone. Starting tomorrow evening. Go to bed."

At night, in the prison-camp bar, they play craps at a table they've contrived, and they talk of a woman forty kilometres away in Rome, who might be just a rumour, a figure invented to do down the boredom, but could also be real as the moon. Hard to remember how the talk of her got started, how anyone in Passo Corese ever heard her name. But her image walks the prisoners' bar like a spectre.

"Contessa, be lucky, bless my dice."

She is said to drift around St. Peter's Square every morning, nine to noon, a woman in her thirties, wears a long black coat and black lace mantilla, a widow risking her life to help escapees. Make your way to the Countess, she'll get you hidden, fed, watered. Don't approach any man. Find this woman, the Contessa. The

men in the Escape Line are spooked, have grown afraid, won't take risks. The woman is the one you need to find.

Rumoured to work with a hothead priest, a big Irishman, tough guy. Knows his boxing. If he wasn't a man of the cloth, he'd be a Friday-night fight starter. Once punched Hauptmann, the Gestapo Commander.

"We got Mick priests back in the Apple," Russo says. "You don't give them no lip. I'm a find me this Countess. She's a looker, so a Limey fella told me once. Laden with dough. And single."

"She's waiting for you, Russo."

"*Mamma mia*. She got me."

"Another beer, Weldrick?"

"Sure thing."

"Say, barkeep, put on a Benny Goodman, let's dance."

Now it's Saturday morning. They hear bells from the village.

Eleven o'clock.

Almost time.

In the holm oaks, the four guards are talking and smoking.

Soon they won't be talking no more, Russo thinks to himself.

Robert Weldrick, Lieutenant, from Evanston, Illinois. Miles and Russo have asked him to lead them. His idea, his plan. Smart guy, Bob Weldrick. Type to notice a situation, see the opportunity waiting to be taken. Prefers Pot Limit Omaha poker to the easier varieties like Hold 'Em. Thinks a thing through. Knows his moves.

"Fellas," he'd said quietly, one night over cards in the bar. "I'm going to Rome, meet that Contessa. You in?"

A small-town lawyer back at home, in his father's and uncle's firm. Didn't wait to get drafted, enlisted May '42. Captured in Tobruk after a bad, mean fight. Shipped him up to Italy with a hundred and ninety other prisoners. Treated okay on the troopship—the Jerry sailors were approachable—but that didn't last, as Weldrick knew it wouldn't. Soon as they got to the camp, that stopped.

Prisoners were separated into new subgroups, the Jerries didn't want them among friends, tried to break down their will, get compliance. He was beaten into a cage with nineteen men he'd never seen. Half a litre of water daily. Sun hot enough to melt rocks. No shade.

This morning in March, he remembers that cage where seven men died. For the rest of his life, he'll remember.

The rest of his life might be the next three minutes. But he's not going back in a cage.

The croak of crows. High oaks. The smell of woodsmoke.

A little bridge made of stone. Biblical rain last night—the stream running fast. Broken branches in the eddying pool.

Russo, a tiler, from 116th Street, East Harlem; all four of his grandparents Neapolitan. Sonny Miles, a Coca-Cola truck driver and spare-time musician from Minden, Louisiana. Some of his people were Cajun, others were Choctaw and Spanish. A great-grandfather stolen from Africa is still alive.

They glance. Nod. No going back.

The ante's about to get upped.

The guards smoking, lazily laughing, right there by the bridge. Fooling around like colts. They're young.

It's the habit of two of the village girls to go by around now. Not long after you hear the bells from the church. On Fridays, the brunette wears that dress ("Man, she knows how to fill it," Miles says) with the hundred yellow polka dots on the night-black background. ("*Mio dio*," Russo says, "just watching them stars.") So the guards will get a little giddy, be fooling and fussing, and pinching each other's cheeks; pucking shoulders and backs. And combing each other's raggle-taggle hair just in case.

Except they don't have a comb between them.

Russo pulls out the two-bit comb he won shooting craps in the prisoners' bar. Walks up to the guard who anyone would sense is in charge. Not the Sergeant, but the most talkative.

"*Was machst du*?" the guard asks.

Russo offers him the comb.

"Here you go, Hermann. Me to you."

They're not the complete worst, the type of goons they'd put on the work detail. Let you take the odd break. Don't be busting your hump. Even give you a smoke if they got one to spare. You got sadists in the camp, but not these four, they're okay. Conscripts Russo's own age. Maybe younger.

The talkative guard is looking confused. Says something to his buddies. Russo takes out a spanner and smashes him across the jaw.

They leave the tied-up guards beneath the bridge, gagged with lengths of bracken, start to run for the high-grown fields to the south-south-east, but Russo has taken a bullet to the femoral artery and is moving too slowly. Delirious, he is talking about a girl back home, Angela Proietti, who works the register in her father's office equipment store on East 181st, where Russo tiled the shopfront canopies. "Went to school with my sister, Vittoria. Yous know Angela, right?"

Then the Contessa, the Contessa, the Contessa in Roma.

"Gonna kneel at her shoes, boys. She ain't never been with no *ragazzo* from Italian Harlem."

Weldrick and Miles carry him half a mile, though the maelstroms of dust, through the thick, dark forest, across a fence-posted clearing, and now he's telling them to go on without him, but they can't. Bleeding shockingly but they manage to staunch it. Eyes rolling like a doll's. Unconscious, then waking, weeping in Italian for his father.

"*Papà, non è giusto. Ti voglio bene.*"

From the turn along the road, two bicycles.

The young women they've seen before—the girls from the village, who often come by around this time. Aged nineteen or twenty. Are they sisters? Friends? One in her yellow polka-dot frock on a night-black background, the other in work breeches like a farmer's and a heavy muslin shirt.

They stand with feet either side of their bicycles.

Russo praying in broken Italian. His face white with pain.

They know what these young men are.

Hurrying over, they start helping Russo as best they can, kneel, mop his forehead, tear a length off the hem of the yellow polka-dot frock to make him a bandage. The girl in purple urges in bad English to get everyone into the woods, the Germans are on their way, we've just seen their trucks in the square, and she hurtles away on the bicycle to get help.

They make it into the acacia trees, just before the column grumbles past, lorried infantry, a Panzer III, ten motorcyclists. Weldrick is scared they'll see the blood on the sandy, winding road but somehow they don't. Russo worsening. Face soaked. Teeth clenched.

A clearing. By the brook. Near a hovel for huntsmen. The young woman in farmer's clothes says a Hail Mary in Italian, holds his hand for a while, mops his face, speaks softly, until Anthony Russo dies.

No time to bury him. She is pulling them away.

Her parents hide Weldrick and Miles in a disused pigsty they have on their land, at the end of a scraggy meadow prone to flooding, down a laneway. More a marsh than a meadow, more a wasteland than a lane. Near a mule track that leads to the abandoned site of a hydroelectric station. Constantino and Adelasia Magliocco; their daughter Carmela is the schoolteacher in the neighbouring village; Cinzia Trovalusci, the young woman in the polka-dot dress, is her second cousin.

They bring food, although it is clear from how they look at it that they have little themselves. Omelette. An onion. "*Buon appetito.*" Sometimes bread—not every day. Spaghetti and mutton. Usually, the bread is stale but that's how Italians like it, not too fresh. Earthenware flasks of moonshine, which makes you sleep, the Maglioccos explain in mime. On Miles and Weldrick, it doesn't work.

At night the wind brings the distant yelps of the bloodhounds. But Magliocco has a way of foxing them, dropping handfuls of tarragon around the woods. Sprinkling pepper and urine in the lanes. Whenever you need to piss, he tells Miles and Weldrick, walk to the end of the lane, do it there, but be careful. The yawling of the bloodhounds riles up the wild hogs. You don't want to be around an angered sow.

On Miles's twenty-third birthday, Magliocco comes to the pigsty looking downcast. They'll have to leave; his wife is worried. The neighbours have been asking questions. Odd sounds have been heard from the old piggery at night, odd sights have been seen in the marsh. Strangers walking by moonlight, two men, speaking English. Which the townspeople over the stream tried hard not to hear. But water will carry sound. Nothing to avoid it. There's little else to listen to at night in these parts. And the *Tedeschi*—the Germans—offer a bounty for a captured prisoner. Miles and Weldrick are in danger. So are the Maglioccos. Time to go.

A peasant in the next-but-one village—where Carmela teaches school—will be setting out for Rome the following day to sell his artichokes and turnips. Scrawny, withered things, where some parasite or another has got to them, not good enough for the country people, but the farmer reckons even such wretched produce might fetch something in the starved city. Magliocco gives them clothes: old canvas pants, dirtied-up work

shirts. Mud-stained boots.

Weldrick writes him a chit for a hundred dollars, he and Miles sign it. When the Allies come, he tells Magliocco, give them this, you'll be paid.

"*No, no,*" he protests.

"You take it."

"And get Russo a proper burial," Miles says.

"*Sì,*" Magliocco nods.

Embracing them, he stands in the laneway a long time as they go, his silhouette waving a hat.

Two days the trek takes. Sweltering hours on the road. A fearful night in a field where beasts they can't see go snuffling in blue darkness. Waking wet from the dew and eaten alive by mosquitoes.

Then the turrets of the Eternal City looming up in the dawn. "Christ's skyscrapers," a guy back in the camp used to say. The sullen farmer tells his charges it's time to hide. Get under the pile of turnips and lay still, he'll restack it. That sweet, rotting stench. Over-ripeness and mould. Rain dribbling down through the artichokes.

Watching out through a knothole in the flank of the cart.

Gestapo men.

Hungry kids.

Swarms of RFP, the Fascist police.

The stink from the cart can be read on the German sentries' faces, they wave the peasant and his cargo through, pinching noses, miming puking. Rain surges hard. Now, a cobbled back street bumping below, the strangeness of the jolts coaxing whinnies from the workhorse.

You can hear you're in a city; you don't need to see. Revving motorcycles. Coughing trucks. A singsong from a school yard. Trolley-cars. The calls of beggarmen. Gunfire.

Weldrick risks a look through the knothole, is startled to glimpse the Colosseum. Thirty short yards from him, stark and grey in the rain. He wants to call out, to tell Miles, but anything more than a murmur would mean death.

Ten minutes, twenty, he lies on his back, saying nothing. The clop of the workhorse. Zizzing flies.

Now, dark high-walled alleys. Tall, stern buildings on either side. Many-windowed, glaring across at each other. Libraries no one has visited in a hundred years. Embassies of kingdoms long vanished. Nunneries. Chapterhouses. Snarling gargoyles. Dead statues. Cracked windowpanes thick with dust, every stone and stair black. Weldrick doesn't know it yet, but he is about to enter the capital of an empire. These are the back streets off St. Peter's Square.

"Men get out," the farmer murmurs, in the broken English they didn't know he had until now. "Start walk. That direction. Find Countess."

"*Grazie mille*."

"*Aspetta un momento*," he says. "Where my chit?"

By the time they lace their boots, the cart is already clopping away, the horse's tail swishing disconsolately at the mosquitoes. Past the half-collapsed doorways, the iron-grilled basements, the Madonnas in their long-grimed alcoves.

Up ahead, though a gap in the rooftops, they see the cupola atop the mountain of the dome.

But they're lost in the back streets, circling, as men in a maze.

They walk fifteen long minutes, with no point to fix on, only to somehow find themselves back at the corner from where the stinking cart departed, a pile of greenish dung on the cobbles, and having to start out again. Passing a down-at-heel hotel, Swastika flags on its balcony. Half a dozen Nazi officers through the windows of the front lounge, roistering, laughing, playing billiards, Hauptmann, Gestapo Commander of Rome, among them. They've seen his face in a newspaper. That's the only way you want to see it.

Onward. Swills of panic. An old lady fanning herself in a doorway seems to notice them. She doesn't say a word. Just nods towards an archway. Makes the sign of the cross. Points her fan.

Through the arch, through a portico, and suddenly they're into the square.

An immensity that makes Weldrick gasp.

The vastness of a football arena. Must be ninety thousand people.

Miles removes his hat.

Bell song. Banners. The leaping, lavish fountains. Around the colonnade rooftop, statues of the saints.

Weldrick realises he is crying. Miles takes him by the arm. Neither soldier is religious. At this moment, both pray.

For their loved ones back at home. For Anthony Russo and his family. For the German guards they had to

hurt. For the farmer who smuggled them into Rome. For the Maglioccos who, unbeknown to Miles and Weldrick, are already dead. Shot by firing squad against the wall of a pigsty.

The two giant clock faces staring down from the basilica see all.

Five hundred, a thousand priests—platoons and battalions of priests—but no one who fits the description of the Monsignor. Many, *many* women, everywhere you look, but no black-clad Contessa ranging slowly through the crowd.

Was it all just a story?

Where to turn now.

Two hot hours, drifting the square, north to south, watching out. The tolling of the basilica bells causes cloudbursts of pigeons and as they settle again, pecking the cobbles, resentfully blustering their wings, Weldrick notices something worth noticing.

A figure over there, by the nearest of the fountains.

Smoking.

Head low.

Pretending to peer at the ground.

Male.

Slim and rangy.

Might be thirty, thirty-five.

Linen pants, straw hat, bottle-lens sunglasses, pleated jacket. Like a skinnier Douglas Fairbanks about to enter a jungle. But consulting a little book that might be a Baedeker. Now asking a passing nun for directions but she appears not to understand, shakes her head, wags a finger, hurries onward.

As the figure moves to approach him, Weldrick clocks something in the gait. Not the walk, as such, but something less nameable about the uprightness of the torso and, maybe, the length of the neck.

He is certain.

The figure is not a man.

Guidebook in hand, she tilts back her sun hat. Drifts over, out of a cluster of pilgrims, lowers her chin and says, in a European accent, as though to the paving stones, "Excuse me, sir, for bothering you, but do you happen to speak English?"

"Yeah."

"I wonder might you know the way to the Musei Vaticani?"

"You the Countess?"

Her response is a grim chuckle. "I look like a Countess?"

"My name is Robert Weldrick, United States Armed Forces, Lieutenant, Seventh Armoured Division. A friend of the Contessa. And the Monsignor."

"I am Marianna de Vries, Swiss by nationality, a journalist. You are in safe hands now. Follow me."

"I'm with a comrade. Sonny Miles."

"Where is he?"

"We split up to walk the square, said we'd meet at the obelisk in an hour."

"You and I need to go immediately. *Andiamo.*"

"I'd rather wait for Miles."

"What you'd rather is immaterial."

"No can do."

"You must do as you wish, Lieutenant. But this is how it works. Your comrade might already be safe or might already be in the custody of the Gestapo, my duty is to you and you only. We need to go. If you're coming."

"Where to?"

"Act with calm," she says. "Do not run. Do not pause. Look *straight* ahead only, not right or left or behind. Follow me at a distance of forty metres, no closer. In and out of the crowd as you do. No rush. Understand?"

He's shaking.

"Four minutes from now, you are safe," she murmurs. "Two hundred and forty seconds. Count them down as you go."

So begin the longest two hundred and forty seconds of Robert Weldrick's life.

German riflemen around the piazza's edge in clusters of six. The borderline on the cobbles painted red. A tank. Armoured cars. Dug-in machine guns. A customs post. Rottweilers trying to chew through their leashes.

Gestapo with field glasses, instructing two cameramen alongside them to film sections of the crowd. A smartly dressed young woman with them, eyeing pilgrims, making notes on a clipboard.

Signboards, black lettering, in Italian and English:

ABETTING A FUGITIVE
IS PUNISHABLE BY DEATH

Troops checking passports and identity cards against a list. A man in a Dominican friar's habit and hood is pistol-whipped, arms wrenched behind his back. Someone springs from the crowd of watchers, tries to wrestle the prisoner from the Gestapo men beating him. Who in hell would be so stupid as to try a crazy stunt like that?

Sonny Miles.

Fighting the guards.

Kicked to the ground.

Hot, shocked, trembling, Weldrick keeps walking. Hears the echoed shots behind him, from across the borderline, pop, pop, pop. Then the screams. German snipers on the roof of a burnt-out embassy across the street.

Sixty seconds. A hundred.

Now, shouts from his left.

"You there, American soldier! Raise your hands."

He's certain he's been clocked by the sentries on the roof. Up ahead he sees Marianna de Vries, weaving steadily between the pilgrims. He is thinking of running. She never looks back.

Hundred and twenty seconds.

If he runs, he knows he's dead.

So he walks.

All he does.

Hundred and ninety.

Two hundred.

Sees her crossing the little bridge to the left of the basilica, and he follows, head low, arms heavy by his side, bracing for the bullet which he knows is coming, the shot between his shoulders, when everything will extinguish, but for some reason the shot doesn't come.

Over the bridge he and Marianna are met by a woman who leads him hurriedly up an S-shaped flight of stairs and into a long, tall-windowed room that looks as though it was once a refectory. Cheap reproductions on the walls, the Stations of the Cross. Behind the head table, a Limey officer introduces himself as Major Samuel I. Derry, Royal Artillery, Acting OC of the Escape Line known as "the Choir," salutes, then reaches out to shake hands.

"Sorry your friend bought it. Hard cheese."

The debrief takes an hour, Weldrick giving every piece of information he can remember of Passo Corese—the guards, their weaponry and disposition, the names, rank and regiments of other escapees, Derry supplying cigarettes but no coffee ("Don't have it") and making notes. There are men hiding in the ruins of a glassworks near Poggio Catino, Weldrick says, and others in the tower there, at the top of the hill, and others who set out for the coast, travelling by night, dressed as tramps.

Derry asks if he'd be okay on his own, there's a good hideout in Prati but it's unorthodox and cramped and only fit for one man.

"Might be tough psychologically if you're the claustrophobic type. Hollow in a wall behind a wardrobe."

"I'd prefer to be in company," Weldrick says. "If that's possible."

"Sea view? Bed and breakfast?"

"Say again?

"Joke. We'll put you in the Opera House. Regular party every night."

"How so?"

"Old theatre near Trastevere, derelict for years, bricked up. Forty or fifty Books there. That's our word for an escapee. The Jerries never go there, nor does anyone else. Vivid atmosphere. You'll like it. Piece of advice?"

"What's that?"

"One thing I've learned, scout—maybe the only thing—from our work. Ever reckon you're in trouble? Stay exactly where you are. Because the Devil has worse, friend. The Devil has worse. And he's waiting for you to take it. He's patient and cunning. Like the Irish. Remember that. Let's get you some grub."

The woman he saw on the bridge brings a plate of soup and a bundle of clothes that must once have belonged to a priest—black flannels, shirt and jacket, freshly laundered, still warm from the iron—and kneels to measure Weldrick's bloodied feet with a tape, but the sense with which he was raised of the dignity due to women means he is uncomfortable to have a woman kneel before him, and he edges back his chair.

"Size eleven," he tells her, as she rises, looking into his face.

"*Grazie*," says the Countess Landini.

COMMUNIQUÉ
TOP SECRET
CLASSIFIED

From: Himmler, Reichsführer of the Schutzstaffel, Wilhelmstraße, Berlin, 14th March 1944

To: Hauptmann, Chief of the SiPo, Gestapo Headquarters, Via Tasso, Rome

Subject: Your final warning

Hauptmann,

Further to my numerous previous communications regarding this matter, I am directed by the Führer to write to you conveying his intense displeasure.

It has been evident for months, in fact since very shortly after the taking of Rome by the heroic forces of the Reich, that a well-funded and ruthlessly organised Escape Line is operating from inside Vatican City, under the command of a Roman Catholic priest, one O'Flaherty, an Irishman, and a Communist Roman Countess, Giovanna Landini, with the connivance of a ragtag of pro-Allied accomplices who refer to themselves collectively as "the Choir."

This mob could not operate without material support from our enemies: illegal radios, provisions, and, most importantly, information. An efficient and well-run enterprise, indeed. All of this is being done under your nose.

Intelligence has reported that, while members of this illegal grouping come and go, apparently at will, abetted by a wider network of minor collaborators throughout the city and suburbs, the central committee remains unaltered.

Are these mediocrities and misfits to continue flouting the Reich?

Double agents have established that these agitators are all now resident in Vatican City, in fact in the British ambassador's apartment on the second floor of the former Casa dei Pellegrini San Matteo (floor plan attached), to which some fled in late December following your failure to apprehend them.

Despite my repeated orders that these criminals must be liquidated, nothing has been achieved. The activities of this gang have, if anything, intensified. Little wonder that Allied escapees continue to flood into the city. The resultant propaganda value for the enemy is, of course, immense. We are seen as a laughing stock outwitted by nonentities and a so-called noblewoman without military experience or training. This is your responsibility.

How difficult can it be for you, as Gestapo Commander of Rome, to root out this cancer? Do you not think that I have better things to do during a war we are now fighting on many fronts than beg you to perform your sworn duty?

Hauptmann, we are at a crossroads. Many times, I have given you notice that it was approaching. You appear not to have listened. Now, it is here.

If you continue to fail in this most elementary of tasks, you will be relieved of your command and

summoned to Munich, there to answer to the Führer in person for having disappointed and disgraced the Fatherland in its hour of greatest need.

That will not be a pleasant experience.

The Führer is a suspicious person when orders are not expedited and is given to reaching stern conclusions. The benefit of the doubt is not something he affords. He appears to be approaching the view that enemy prisoners are escaping because you are permitting them to do so. As he remarked to me not an hour ago, speaking of yourself: "Incompetence can be a disguise for treason."

Here are your orders:

4671/A: You will henceforth report to me twice weekly by radio on your progress.

4671/B: Your wife and two children, whom I understand are lodged with you in a villa at Lake Nemi, are to be returned to Berlin immediately and placed under my personal supervision. I have authorised a military jeep and armed escort for the purpose. If your wife and children are not in my custody by 18.00 hours tomorrow, your parents and your wife's parents here in Berlin will be detained by the Secret Police for precautionary questioning.

4671/C: You will vacate the property at Nemi on receipt of this communiqué and move your quarters into the city of Rome within twelve hours. There are scores of empty properties.
Find one.

Your days of playing a little Nero in the lakeside pleasure-house are over.

Smash the Escape Line. Or face the inevitable.

Heil Hitler
Heinrich Luitpold HIMMLER, Reichsführer of the Schutzstaffel

7

WEDNESDAY 15TH MARCH 1944
Notice posted to hundreds of walls in Rome

Message from Commander Hauptmann
to the citizens
DO NOT IGNORE

Despite my sternest appeals, the grave problem of hidden absconders persists in every neighbourhood of the great city we share. Therefore, now, I must act.

Be advised:

To facilitate the gathering of intelligence and to smash the pro-Communist Escape Line, agents of the Reich have been placed covertly among the population of Allied escapees and Jews known to be hiding in Rome. Of every ten fugitives, three are Gestapo operatives.

If harbouring a fugitive, know he may be a Gestapo operative. If a fugitive yourself, and you read this warning, know that the man alongside you in the room is noting your every remark and action.

You will say that he does not seem to be.

We select only those who do not seem.

The less he seems, the more he is.

Mistrust your neighbour.

Doubt his words and motivations.

His testimony will be given against you.

In friendship and the wish for new beginnings, an amnesty is hereby offered.

Absconders presenting themselves at Gestapo Headquarters, Via Tasso, will be fed, clothed, processed in accordance with the long-honoured customs of wartime, and treated with dignity and mercy. No abuse of returning prisoners will be tolerated—on this, I give my solemnest word. Wehrmacht surgeons, nurses, and dentists will be on hand. Other than taking the life of a German soldier or prison guard, crimes committed during an escape will be overlooked or, at worst, punished by a fine. As a material gesture of forgiveness and goodwill, the owner of any premises from which an escapee is evicted and brought to justice will be given an extra week's food ration. This offer expires on Saturday at 06.30 hours.

At 06.31 hours on that date, a ruthless programme of roundups and house raids will commence. No mercy will be shown. All escapees and collaborators will be taken to the Terzo Braccio at Regina Coeli prison for interrogation, followed by execution. Every hiding place that has been reported to us will be raided, without exception.

Mothers, think of your children.

Wives, of your husbands.

There is no need for you to inflict or to suffer further pain.

Act now.

Your friend,

Paul Hauptmann

8

WEDNESDAY 15TH MARCH 1944
07.21 HOURS

I *am Hauptmann*, she thinks. *What do I see*?

A city I despise. A people I consider beneath me, whose great art is all in the past, who rarely in seven centuries produced music worth the name. Their reeking, foetid streets, their pickpockets and swindlers, the pigswill of the pap they call food. Unctuous slop for peasants with salt-cakes for taste buds. Offal-pulping, tripe-chewing, thumb-sucking muttonheads, in hock to lurid Popery while secretly resenting it, rattling their beads at bad frescoes. Who despise me—fine—and fear me—even better. But continue to fight me. Not fine. Unacceptable.

What am I doing wrong?

I must unpeel what they mistake for victories and show them to be defeats. Every time they best me, retaliation will be swift—but served in a way they don't expect.

Keep them guessing.

Undermine.

Erode by false praise.

Never let them predict you. Except for your vengeance.

Don't show them how afraid you are.

Ever.

Dress it up.

She falls into a dawn-dream of her palazzo, the old, dark rooms.

Her curtained and sombre four-poster bed, the leather-framed architectural drawings for the Chiesa di San Carlino alle Quattro Fontane. Experts thought them lost. Paolo found them.

The clocks, the unicorn tapestries, the Morocco-bound volumes.

A portrait of her. Sèvres vases. An aquatint of the Villa Farnese. A globe owned by Paolo's great-grandfather. Sketches of two young women no one has ever been able to identify: inscrutable, Venetian, something cruel about the line of the mouth. A student visiting from the Accademia once asked were they depictions of the same woman. Paolo thought them a man in disguise.

As always, she is ascending the staircase, searching, not finding—a candlestick, a wooden bowl, a yellowed quarto of plainchant manuscript containing a coded address in Monti. When she finds it, if she does, the minims pulse and swivel on their staves before sliding off the margins and clinking to the black and white tiles, and the crotchets sprout legs, like horrible little crabs, and scuttle into the sighing bookshelves.

There is the sound of the sea, of gulls, a fairground roundabout. A fresco of Hauptmann, on the strand at Ostia, near the lido in winter, facing out to the breakers and the stone-grey sky. In the distance, a lightship. Wife and young children by his side.

Jolting awake in the stifle of the British Ambassador's study, to the airlessness and the haversacks and the curtained-off commode, the rinsed undergarments on clotheshorses, the half-read novels and overflowing ashtrays—the smells of a small room never meant to be slept in—she silently says a decade of the rosary as she counts the plaster cracks in the ceiling, waiting for sunrise to cross the floor.

The rusty, hard camp bed creaks with every move. Near her, in the hammock, Marianna stirs. The cushions on which Delia and Blon used to sleep have been stacked in the window alcove. You'd miss Delia, though she could be difficult in the mornings.

The whistling through the partition wall means Frank Osborne is shaving, which he does twice daily, his growth being heavy. "Standards are standards. We don't want to look like a pirate." Last night was his turn to stand watch on the landing; he'll be tired, might be cranky. It troubles him, she knows, the prospect of having to shoot someone, even a Nazi.

He has seen people die. So has everyone in Rome.

Raise your thoughts, Paolo whispers. *Or the day will be long. Today is the Ides of March.*

Where are you? she asks him.

I don't know.

A tomcat appears at the window, moth-eaten, snarly, pawing at some minuscule life form on the glass.

"Contessa?" calls Johnny May from the corridor.

"Yes, darling?"

Her voice hoarse.

"Making tea here in a minute, stick your name in the pot?"

"Lovely, Johnny, *grazie*."

"Bring it in to you in bed, if you like?"

She finds the glum flirtation cheering, a way of bouncing a ball between them. He does it out of boredom, or, heaven help him, a sense of duty. A footballer lobbing in a speculative half-effort from the edge of the box.

"I am not receiving visitors just now, Johnny. Even ones as handsome as you."

"Pity."

"Run along, nuisance."

"Yes, heartbreak."

Artbreak, in his accent.

The bittersweetness stirred in her by his London talk.

But this isn't a day for recollections.

She hears him singing in the kitchenette, in mock aria style, the words of a newspaper advertisement from *The Times*.

> *"Make that morning glory feeling*
> *Last all dayyyy.*
> *No more five o'clock shadow.*
> *Gem blades."*

Derry finds this latest habit tiresome. That's why May does it.

"That's such a lie, Johnny," she chides him. "You know you love Derry."

"Lies ain't lies, shrimp. They're improvisations. You take what you know and start riffing."

Derry and Osborne look like ghosts of themselves. Both smoking near the window. Osborne shaking his head.

"What is wrong?" she asks.

"Jo," he says quietly. "Can you be a dear and gather the others?"

"Frank, is something the matter?"

"No need. Here they are. Could we all please be seated. This won't take long."

Johnny May and Marianna sit stiffly to the table. The air in the room is changing colour.

"Perhaps, Frank," Derry says, "we should send for the Monsignor."

"I have taken the liberty of already telling him the dreadful news, Sam. He is too upset to be with us just now."

"Told him what?" asks May. "Cough it up."

"Dear friends," Osborne says shakenly. "It is my duty to tell you that a very heartbreaking message has come in overnight."

With the back of his wrist, he wipes tears.

"Frank?"

He allows her to take his right hand. He nods, swallowing, trying to steady.

"Some of us have been wondering, I know, what has become of our beloved comrade Enzo Angelucci—that brave, good man who lodged with us before returning—to see his family."

He pauses, takes a sip of water. Leans on his splayed fingers. Shoulders shaking.

"I am sorry to have to tell you—" sobbing quietly, Derry's arm around his shoulder—"that Enzo—has suffered an unimaginable blow. Elisabetta, his wife—*buonanima*, may God rest her soul—was killed in last week's air raid on Tiburtina."

"Dear God, no."

"He has brought their two children under cover to be with her people in the country. And won't return for a bit. I've of course sent a message to take his time."

"Which leaves us with a problem," Derry says reluctantly. "Enzo was due to return to us last night and was

scheduled to run an important Rendimento today, a drop of cash in the city. We're all busy, I know. But we shall have to double up. Someone will need to run two missions today, not one. So, with the Ambassador's permission, I will now ask for volunteers. Who'll do it for Enzo?"

Every trembling right hand around the table is raised.

"Thank you," Derry says. "We'll draw lots."

Lent. It should be colder. But the seasons are out of kilter.

Jo exits from the darkness of the Cinema Trevi, into the blazing white of noonday.

The stink of brimming sewers, in a gutter the rotting carcass of a dog.

My life, she thinks. *My life without you.*

The coal cart she is pushing trundles heavily over the cobbles, its bockety wheel creaking, her damp fingers on the loose handle. Careful to keep her head bowed, she adjusts the coal-heaver's drooping cap, doesn't need to see where she is going.

She knows.

Handful of pebbles in the left boot, to cause her to limp. Jacket wetted and only half-dried, so mould has bloomed on the frieze. Smell is an ally. It keeps people away.

Down Via Benedicta, a side street too small to need or deserve a name, then the laneway leading into the swelter that is the little piazza. Past two lovers having an argument, windmilling their hands in denunciation, the girl making to walk away but always turning back, the boy exuberantly shooing but desperate for her to remain. She burns to command them *For Christ's sake, grow up*, but now she hears the gush of the great fountain as she approaches.

Wipes her hot, sprayed face.

Permits herself a glance.

Tour guides holding aloft walking sticks with handkerchiefs tied on.

Lenten Pilgrims. Nuns. Beggars. Swindlers.

Hawkers of holy pictures. Five Fascist police.

In twos and tidy threes, SS officers on furlough from the north. Their laughter at the tricksters. The crisp briskness of German banter.

Beads of moisture on the peaks of the death's-head-badged caps, on the lenses of the sunglasses. Clapping each other on the back in an oddly formal way that makes the gesture seem part of a ritual, not a spontaneous embrace. Throwing coins into the fountain, to wish for a happy return to Rome.

They don't seem to notice the coal-heaver trudging by, head low, the heavy handcart, the wince-making limp, through the lovers and bead-sellers and card sharps and nuns. Don't hear the squeak-and-grate-and-squeak of the half-buckled flywheel as it truckles over slick, stinking cobblestones.

Cooler now, shadowed, as she enters the *passaggio*. Tall rooftops on either side. Echoed radios.

Sending prayer to Angelucci, whose mission this was. *Enzo, Christ bless you, return the prayer to me, comrade. I am frightened today. Keep me strong.*

Above the balconies hung with laundry, the impossible blue of the sky, like the blue of the fountain, of the Virgin's sash in a Caravaggio. The cooling, mellow dreaminess of blueberry gelato or memories of a long-gone courtship. Pushing the stubborn, unwieldy cart, sweat dripping from her upper lip.

A tattered Italian flag.

Bullet holes in a door.

Heat-shrivelled posters of black-and-red Swastikas. A line of notices saying the consequence for curfew-breaking is five years' hard labour in Poland. Looters will be shot on sight.

From the cart, she takes a filthy sack containing ten bottles of chloral hydrate medicine and twenty-five staling loaves. Places the sack on a windowsill, beneath which someone has chalked a perfect circle, limps onward.

Behind her, she hears the shutter quickly open and close. Act One of this morning's Rendimento is accomplished.

On a bench outside a barber's shop, three once-handsome old duffers are arguing about the secret piece of ordnance the Germans claim to have, the weapon so terrible it could end the war in one night. A bomb that pulverises buildings but leaves people alive. A *sound* that kills the hearer. Strychnine in the aqueducts.

Robots. Hypnotism. Witchcraft. Zombies.

"I tell you, it's fact, boys, these Nazis can raise the dead."

"Bullshit," says the oldest. But he looks uncertain.

"You ain't never seen a ghost?"

"Ghosts are different. Ghosts exist."

"They breathe? Eat?"

"They don't need to eat."

"Then they don't buy black market. Lucky bastards."

Black market prices are rising by the hour. A kilo of pasta costs the same as a bicycle. But bicycles have been made illegal, may not be sold without Gestapo permission because *partigiani* grenade-throwers have been using them to escape. People are eating weeds, the bark of trees, their children's pets. Meanwhile the SS men fatten.

Pink-faced, tunics straining. A bit slow, prone to waddle. It is said that Hauptmann has offered a reward to every man in his command who loses weight. Fifty contraband cigarettes per kilo.

"The Reich must be taut," is his motto.

Das Reich muss straff sein.

Two German soldiers with a bucket of paste, slopping a misspelt bill to the gable of a chapel:

FORGERS AND BLACK MARKETEERS
WILL BE SHOT
COMMANDER HAUPTMANN

In the doorway of a tenement, three grumbling *gattare*, the elderly women who feed Rome's feral cats. One old dear in a tattered blue mantilla fans herself with a cracked souvenir plate depicting a deceased Pope, as she purrs and lows and threshes with heat-misery, her two companions reciting the sorrowful mystery of the rosary.

Jo pauses, lights a cigarette, exchanges a word or two with the ladies—the terrible price of eggs, the behaviour of Fascist boot-boys, the rumour of further bombings tonight. When she turns, the handcart has gone. Act Two has been achieved.

As she turns the corner, almost a hairpin, onto Vicolo del Monticello, she becomes aware that something is wrong.

A man she recognises, following. Twenty metres behind.

Black tunic, Swastika epaulettes. Hand on his holster.

The confidence of the stride. Forehead high like a horse's.

Don't look back, is Derry's motto. You're dead if you look back. Keep walking. Make a plan. Then, stick to it.

Sweat stings her eyes. Nausea. Dizziness. She considers making for the side doorway of the cat-women's tenement but decides against it—he might kill them.

Stumbling on, weakly. The sun roaring down.

Help me, she says to the spirit of her husband, walking through that ghost as one walking through the smell of a meal.

Paolo. Wake up. Hauptmann's trailing me. I need you.

She stops. Ties a lace. Glances in a knife-grinder's window.

Hears the boot-steps pause behind her. Waiting.

"You there," he calls. "I should like to buy some coal."

If she can get to her motorcycle. There it is. Near the street lamp.

A pre-war Triumph Tiger. Harley windscreen soldered on. Mismatched wheels. Rusting fuel tank. Not worth stealing.

"Coal-heaver, didn't you hear me?"

Be calm. Purposeful. Approach the bike without hesitance. Twenty metres to go. Now fifteen. Only ten.

Pull the key from your pocket. Casually. Try to whistle.

Parched, cracked lips.

Stones in her boot.

A shot smashes the mailbox a few metres before her.

"Raise your hands," he says. "My next bullet won't miss. I am aiming at your head. Turn to face me."

The pistol is steady in his grip as she obeys his command. Sunlight making him squint. He is taller than she remembers. For some reason, she has long imagined that he would be grinning at this moment but his expression is oddly impassive, betraying only the mildest look of interest, as though observing an unusual insect make its way up a wall.

"Enchanted to see you, Contessa. Keep your hands held high."

She is silent as he approaches, very slowly.

"Half an hour ago," he says, "I received a tip-off by radio that you had been spotted in this neighbourhood, in your very poor disguise, which would not fool a blind man. It has taken me only a few minutes to find you.

Anything clever to say?"

"You are not worth wasting words on."

"We will see if that remains your view after a week as my guest."

"It shall always remain my view. You are nobody."

"Whereas you, of course, are a social superior. Isn't slumming it in the Vatican a little beneath Your Ladyship? I shall find you more suitable accommodation."

She says nothing.

"In the cells at Gestapo headquarters, Contessa, we have the finest champagne. Oysters every morning. You'll like it."

Behind him in the laneway the most elderly of the cat-ladies appears, a vision of Old Testament malevolence in black, ragged shawls. She calls out a venomous obscenity. Now repeating it, louder, a word of cutting hatred, now scowling and gurning and spitting in the dust, her left hand shaping the gesture of the two-fingered horns as her chant becomes a needling shriek. A moment as he turns to her. She points to her eye and makes the sign of the cross.

"*Occhio, si t'ancagliu*," she warns. Beware if I catch you. "*Brucerai all'inferno!*" You'll burn in hell.

Jo hurtles towards the bike. His shots strike the kerbstones around it, the walls and shuddering lamp posts, those crooked granite steps. The shots raise the strange powdery stink of something like anthracite and the keys in her palm feel weirdly cold in the heat as she throws over her leg and stamps the starter.

It's not possible that she can hear his cantering steps over the shrieky throb of the engine, yet that's what she hears, getting louder.

He's lean, early thirties, five eleven, a middleweight. In marksman stance now, feet half a metre apart. Pistol in right hand, steadied by left.

"Last chance," he bawls.

Now she's revving, gunning the gears, chassis beneath her trying to buck, and she tightens her thighs like a horsewoman facing into a fence. In the side mirror she sees him running, firing, calling out. She's revving through the laneways, back streets, vicolos, laneways so narrow that the ends of the handlebars strike sparks off the walls.

Trying to breathe.

She's lost him.

Uttering a prayer of thanks.

Heart steadying.

A minute or two in a little courtyard when she looks up at the larkspur blue of the sky, at the statue of a saint in a high, mossy niche, but she's lost precious time and must push on.

As she goes, she hears the angry whine of a larger motorcycle than her own.

Being ridden too hard.

She knows what it means.

The dread is like a hand around her spine.

Over her shoulder, on a snub-nosed Moto Guzzi he must have commandeered—a tough, hard bike they use in a fairground Wall of Death. Standing hard on the throttle, his face impassive like an Etruscan mask, and suddenly his mount wheelies away from beneath him, smashing through a greengrocer's window, but he barely pauses, breaks into a run.

Through the reek of piss and dust, the labyrinth of Rome's heart. Blue-black shadows and silver-flickered sunlight.

Face flapping through sheets on washing lines, and still he's coming after her. Head down, running hard, a steeplechaser breasting for the line. Luger in hand, loosing slugs of purple fire. It's as though he knows where she is headed, is part of her, a cell of her brain.

Aiutami! she screams—help me—as she roars past back-street Romans, widows carrying buckets, spivvy youths in their padded ochre jackets and slicked-back hair, yattering about boxing and what's showing at the Cinema Trevi—but nobody helps, they melt into the clunk of heavy doors closing, the *arrivederci* of bolts getting pulled.

Crazy woman on a motorcycle? Ride fast past my door.

She's running out of road. She knows it. So does Hauptmann. As though he's lobbing a looped rope at her heels. She tries to grope for the map of the maze in her head: now right, now left, two rights, across the piazza, and if only she can make it to the rendezvous street there might be a chance, probably won't be, but at least it is possible.

Into the hangar-like gloom of the old covered market. Nineteen ranks of empty stalls. Sunshine on broken roof-glass. A signboard of weird fish and their species names in Latin.

His boot-steps behind her.

Sparrows cheeping in the eaves.

No gate except the one that leads into the adjoining warehouse, a long, thin, hangar-like depository, where factory-seconded furniture used to be stored and marijuana could be bought from sailors before the war. At the north end, the yawn of daylight through the high metal-doored gateway that stares on the street outside.

"Halt," he calls again. "I have marksmen around this building."

As she roars through the doors, they are slammed shut behind her, blocking him.

On the street, Johnny May and a balaclava-clad man she doesn't know wedge closed the heavy bolt and clasp the shackle in a length of anchor chain and padlock. May tosses the key in the gutter. The other man tries to light a stick of gelignite but it won't take. She hears Hauptmann's curses, the blam of his shots against metal.

By the chapel: the black van with its newly painted yellow-and-white coat of arms. A former ambulance donated by Switzerland when the make became defunct. Unreliable. Bad gearbox. Spare parts difficult to source. Repainted in secret by three New Zealand priests sympathetic to the Escape Line.

VATICAN CITY QUARTERMASTER
DO NOT IMPEDE
OPUS JUSTITIAE PAX

She climbs into the cab. Derry at the steering wheel, dressed as a monk.

Johnny May and the other man clambering through a grating in a wall. Pulling shut the ironwork lattice behind them.

"Go," she shouts.

"What about the bike?"

"*To hell* with the bike, Sam, I said *move.*"

"If Hauptmann gets his hands on it, he'll follow us. I can't get more than forty out of this rust-bucket."

Tugging the cigarette from Derry's mouth, she steps down from the van, kicks the bike over, tears open the fuel cap. Petrol blurts and puddles, rainbowing the reeking air. As it soaks and stains her boots, she steps back. Drops the fag end into the glugging puddle, returns to the van.

"*Andiamo*," she says, through the whoosh of flames behind her as the van begins to move.

Retching, she swallows, tries to centre, blinks hard. A memory of cypresses seen through a gallery window, the hotness of a statue's marble when she touched it.

Derry trying to force accelerations out of the cumbersome old van, Hauptmann appears in the side mirror.

Kneels to fire.

Glares upward, at the high rooftops of the derelict warehouses all around him, as though someone has called out his name.

From above, a brick hits the burning motorcycle's handlebars, knocks it sideways. A stone smashes the mirror.

The storm attacks him.

Bricks, chimneypots, lintels, bits of masonry. Beer barrels. Windowsills. Dead birds. A rusting pram. Planks torn from a pigeon loft. Roof slates. Broken architraves. Blocks. Wrenched-off weathervanes. Bottles of piss. Mason's nails.

He flails back into the shelter of the market gateway.

Derry urges the van onward: "Move your *arse*."

On the dashboard the forged pass in Italian and note-perfect German. *The bearer is a representative of the Vatican City quartermaster with responsibility for the provisioning of fifteen extraterritorial monasteries and convents throughout Rome. Interfering with this vehicle is a war crime. By order, Cardinal Ventucci.*

On a passing plinth once stood upon by a statue of Emperor Vespasian, now blown to atoms by a bomb, so that only his sandalled feet remain, is a living creature so disgusting that it takes her a moment to realise it is a cat.

Skeletal.

Flea-mottled.

Eyeless.

Three-legged.

Purring at something it can't see.

"You okay, Jo?" Derry says.

"No, I'm not."

"You've cut yourself." He gestures to his own lips. "Here."

"A scratch." She wipes her mouth. "Weldrick on board?"

“In the back.”
“Faster, Sam.”
“Trying.”
“Try harder.”
“Next stop, the Teatro.”
On the plinth, the wildcat slinks, stretches out in the sun.
Mange-ridden.
Cadaverous.
Trying to lick its empty eye sockets but failing.
No tongue could reach.
Instead, it licks its three sets of claws.
Winnowing at the flies as they writhe.

9

MINUTES LATER

Pilgrims new to Rome think the Teatro dell'Opera long abandoned. Those of a certain disposition feel it deserves a melancholy accompaniment, a tragic minor-key aria sung by a penniless consumptive on whose death the final curtain will fall.

The metal fence around the once-great edifice has in places been stripped away.

The tall first-floor window from where, on the opening night of *Tosca*, Puccini in his cloak saluted the roaring crowd in the street below, now bricked up like a muzzled face.

Rotting garbage in the classical portico used by night people as a latrine.

Splatters of Fascist and anti-Fascist graffiti scream at one another from the pillars:

LIBRO E MOSCHETTO, FASCISTA PERFETTO!
BANDIERA ROSSA TRIONFERÀ!

Barriers of burnt-out buses. A mound of rusted music stands. The corpse of a vandalised cello.

Rocketed during an air raid, the whole oblong of what was once the neoclassical front foyer is now a scummy water-filled crater where wild dogs nose and lap, staggering away afterwards, dizzy, to die.

Like all theatres, the Teatro has its ghosts.

A murdered conductor, Proietti, stares from the reflections of the ice buckets in the ruined crush bar. A mezzo-soprano who leapt to her death from the rooftop is said to walk the cobwebbed wings, singing to the phantom of a prompter. Others say the spirits have more sense than to come around here any more. Let the Teatro crumble into its shadow, we have worse problems in Rome. Music won't save us now.

As Derry and the Countess lead him through the foyer and into the auditorium, Weldrick notices strange details.

Footprints in the dust. Fresh cigarette butts. Empty bottles.

Prayerbooks and pornographic postcards strewn among the scorched velvet pews, where the wealthy not so long ago used to gather in expectation of being seen, to wave fingertips, or flirt behind fans.

From far above him, in the cheap seats known as "the gods," the murmur of conversation.

Listen.

The words are in English.

You gotta.

I ain't.

And your mother.

Okey dokey.

Then the *hiss* to be quiet. As the Contessa tells him, the order is to *always* be quiet in the Teatro.

"Coming here, you take a vow of silence, Weldrick. Understand?"

Weldrick nods.

"Don't look so worried, chum," Derry says, not quite succeeding in clapping him on the shoulder. "It's like a lot of vows in Rome. Pretty flexible."

In the parterre, the OC appears, a blunt Northumbrian, pistol in hand, gesturing up towards the chatter as though gestures could quell it. Drawing his finger across his throat, he scowls. Choked laughter, derisive hoots are the response from on high. The fiction of rank becomes frail in the Teatro. They know he is ridiculous. So does he.

Books hiding in the Teatro come to see they are fortunate, the Contessa tells Weldrick, sotto voce. It is dry, has a roof, has lavatories, some of which, on the upper floors, still function. Basic food is provided—macaroni, horse beans, a little meat—the van in which they brought him has delivered sufficient for two days. The rooftop affords an escape route should a Gestapo raid occur. Rope ladders will be shown to him as part of his induction. There are cellars, an old sewer tunnel that once led to the tepidarium of a Roman bathhouse, ways

out around the back, where the docking bay and scene-painting workshops used to be. A round-the-clock watch system is in effect from the high belltower at the end of the street. Probably from other vantages she doesn't know about.

One of the old dressing rooms has a bathtub. The water comes very intermittently and will never be hot. A queuing arrangement is run by the subcommittee on bathing. There are fifty-nine men here. Waiting time for a bath is currently ten days. In the meantime, the ladies' cloakroom on the bomb-damaged fourth floor has a couple of wash-hand stands. You are requested to pay attention to your personal hygiene, as best you can. A lice infestation going around the Teatro would shut the place down.

To save water, Jo adds, residents are asked to ablute over three days, in a strict sequence that Derry will explain. She turns away, lights a cigarette, looks up at the shattered chandeliers, as though what is about to be said is too masculine to be intruded upon.

"Top half, lower half, feet," Derry says. "One razor blade per fortnight." The Teatro offers those rarities of wartime: space, a little privacy. You share an opera box designed for eight bourgeois with only one companion, your box mate. You'll sleep there, dress there, take your rations there, avoiding gatherings. What is asked in return for the privacy is silence and discretion. Always respect for your box mate, who like yourself is an escapee. He's been through a tough time. Take it easy on him. Do not invite others to your box. Do not visit theirs. Chess or piquet with the Books in the boxes immediately next to your own is permissible, if it is played in box doorways, not within the interior of boxes. Never play for money or food.

"Or favours," the OC adds. "Of any kind. Understand, mate?"

"Got it," says Weldrick.

"I don't need to spell it out?"

"You don't need to spell it out."

A scuffle up in the gods. Something heavy is overturned.

"I'll come up there and smash every one of your ugly faces," the OC hisses. "You miserable sods. Shut it. Now."

"Sure you will, Big Guy," comes the retort, in a sandpaper Staten Island rasp, but the OC pretends not to hear it.

"Never, *ever* go to the dress circle staircase," he tells Weldrick.

"Big Guy knows best," comes the call.

"I'm warning you, shut it, Moody," the OC snaps.

"You're the noisy one, Big Guy. Quit the cackle. We're bored shitless."

The dress circle staircase is where a system of rigged ropes attached to a ceiling-high stack of ice buckets has been set up as alarm. If Jerry does come calling, the fire doors he'll need to smash through at the end of that corridor will trip the guy rope and topple the pile. The racket will warn the escapees to get out through the attic dormers. If further escape proves impossible—say if Jerry's taken the neighbouring rooftops—"We stand hard and give him hellfire to the last." Whatever weapons are available will be readied and handed out. "We have three pistols, about forty rounds, seven grenades." One of the grenades is an anti-tank device, the effect if used inside a building will be horrific. Your duty is to kill at least three German soldiers, preferably officers if there's a choice. After that, it's every man for himself.

If captured, reveal nothing.

"Don't get captured," the Contessa says.

"If you're down to your last bullet," the OC interrupts, "make it count. Now go to your box. It's number twenty-nine. And keep quiet. Understand? You'll have it to yourself. Couple of nights at least."

"I thought you said you were crowded," Weldrick says.

"I did."

"So how come I get a box to myself?

"The two we had in twenty-nine insisted on going out for a stroll yesterday morning."

"And?"

"Shot by the Jerries last night."

A whirring sound. Laughter. They look up to the gods.

Approaching speedily, on a zipwire, a tattoo-torso man in a leopard-skin loincloth, from above him bleary cheers from the darkness.

The OC rolls his eyes as the descender alights on the stage, mock curtseying to the gods and now to baffled Weldrick.

"Jack Moody," he says. "Fine to meet you."

THE VOICE OF JOHN MAY
21ST SEPTEMBER 1963
From transcript of BBC research interview, reel 2,
conducted Coldharbour, Poplar, East London

Tell you about Moody.

Chap you'd remember.

Made an impact.

Can't hardly help his self. Impulsive. Couldn't use the noggin. Didn't listen. Type of geezer thinks he's handy in a scrap but the truth is he ain't. 'Bout as useful as a handbrake on a canoe.

It ain't that he's unlikeable—there's a lot to admire—but you need to keep an eye on him, or he'll treat you like a kipper.

Smart. Genned up. Spouts Italian. Touch of style. Not handsome, exactly, but he's watchable. Sneery. Face like a good-looking ferret.

Thinks he's a wide boy.

Maybe he is.

But they don't come wider than Johnny.

How we met?

Yours truly on spotter duty—hanging about St. Peter's Square like a tart. Maybe a week before Weldrick come to us. Reason I recall? Was my birthday.

Friend Moody was a hell of a present.

Way it worked by early '44, we was busy, run ragged, but one of us in the Choir takes a three-hour shift in the square every day. That was all you could stick. Stroll up and down a bit. Eyes peeled. Have a shufty. Don't get twigged.

Since Christmas I've let the beard grow out, and I've cut the barnet closer. Which can change your whole face. And I've quietened the walk. Where I'm from in the East End, a bloke that don't want a punching walks with a bit of moxie. Give it this with the shoulders, chin up, steel your gaze—but Jerry's got film of us, cunning tosspot, you've got to keep changing things up. So I've learned to walk quiet. So you melt.

This actress I was seeing once, she told me, get your character's walk, you've got them halfway down already. Sweet kid. Bit barmy. Another story.

Somehow the Books had a way of finding you. Like magnetism. Or gravity. I'd stick on priest's clobber, black soutane, broad-brim hat, sandals. Bring along a Bible, stroll up and down between the fountains. Worst thing was not being able to smoke for three sodding hours of your watch. I remember the Contessa and the Padre saying to me, "Johnny, there's plenty of priests who smoke. Go ahead."

I've said, "Not when they're reading the sodding Bible."

So, this day I'm pacing, and I'm getting stuck into the Book of Amos. That ain't one of your major biblical hits, but there's stuff in it expands the mind. Like Bebop.

"Seek ye the maker of the seven stars and Orion." Don't give a toss what you believe, that is lovely, have to say it. The seven stars and Orion. Proper good.

When I'm done, I trouser the Bible. Up and down another hour, or near as makes no matter. The Blue Sisters of Rome was collecting money for the poor, like they do, and they've come over and asked me, and I've give 'em a few sovs.

Time shags on. You're bored stupid. But you're also on edge. Funny mix of feelings. Odd thoughts. You knew a striptease double act called the Blue Sisters worked the nightclubs round Soho. Two nice cheerful girls they was—what the hell was their names? Not literal sisters but you certainly saw a facial resemblance. If that's where you was looking. Disconnected notions. Could you rob the Vatican treasury? What's Dizzy Gillespie doing this very minute?

Reckon I'll go ahead and have a snout, spark one up, start puffing. Soon I'm smoking like a funnel, one coffin nail after the other, trail of fag butts behind me like the babes in the wood chucking breadcrumbs. I'm that much on naffing edge, I roll up what we'll call a special medicinal cigarette including a herbal component. There's been a Jerry raid on the monastery last night, you'd ninety Books was hiding there, now done a bunk out the back, some of the monks pistol-whipped or the Gestapo's dragged them off for a kicking. Jerry ain't never raided no monastery before. Bad, bad feeling, that morning. New rules.

My old mum always says we can't be certain of much in this life. But we can say I'm the only priest smoking a reefer in St. Peter's Square that morning, when this monk I know, a Red Friar, sidles over, tips the wink—we've a *pesce spada*, a swordfish. "Swordfish" was our code for an escapee what's arrived via the river. Didn't happen often, but oftener than you'd reckon. Now and again, they've swam. Other times nicked a rowboat or hopped a barge. Mostly they've drowned and there's a corpse. See, we'd even search the bodies, in case

anything in their clothes was a clue might be useful to Jerry, like the address of a safehouse they was headed to. Need to get to 'em before Jerry. Nasty job. But—tell you a secret now—the river was good to me. The river was my way of getting about Rome without nobody knowing how, not even the Choir. I grew up by the Thames. City rivers have secrets. And usually no one bothers looking down.

The Red Friars, should have said, looked after suicides in the Tiber, so some of them was helping the Choir, keeping watch. This bloke and me slipped out by the fire escape from the Musei Vaticani. Cross the street, through the tram depot, to an apartment block behind the piazza. Priest's gaff, Father Spike Buckley—never knew his right name. Maybe John. Good bloke to have in your corner.

Friend Moody's on Father Spike's floorboards, and he's wetter than a squid's piss. Soaked. Bollocksed up. Half-drowned. From? Rossville, Staten Island. Crew? First Infantry. Escaped? Campo di Concentramento 29, Ponte dell'Olio. Story? Bribes the Guardia Forestale—the Fascist Carabinieri rangers—gets to Rome, pitches up to the monks, done a bunk out the back of the raided monastery last night, he's managed to get himself towards the river and he's legging it for Trastevere—not that he knows it, ain't got a monkey's where he's going—when these Jerries in a half-track tool around the corner and he's had to scarper, lively. Only they've clocked him and he's twigged, they've chased him seven streets, back towards the river, in the end he's jumped off a bridge. Ain't going back to the camp, he'll take his chances as they come.

That was the kind of cat some of the escapees was. Bit reckless. Kind as don't do what they're told.

Moody's shook. But okay. Lived to tell the tale. Keen to come into the Vatican, thinks it's all fluffy towels and Valpolicella out of the fountains, fancies a nice room in the papal palazzo, couple of saucy nuns doing his breakfast. I've told him no, mate, we're full, have a kip, pump the brakes, I'll be back later on with some gen. I've give him a bottle of Scotch and a tin of Red Cross chocolate I had in the soutane. You can fit quite a lot in them pockets. And the Jerries didn't search you.

Think about it, no Jerry's about to say to another fellow Jerry, "Have a butcher's up Brother Geezer's soutane, would you, Fritz?"

So it's back to the ranch, chinwag with Marianna—where we put him? Ain't a bed in sodding Rome, it's like booking in a coach party to Butlin's. So he'll have to go to the Opera House. Which we do.

Three-ish that same afternoon, me and Derry's collected him at Father Spike's and he's on at me about the Vatican again. All the way down the Teatro in the back of the bread van, he's rabbit, rabbit, rabbit, giving it large in your earhole—till I've said to him, mate, if you don't fancy the plan, do feel free to fruitcake off somewhere else. Some people. Taking liberties. That's your Yank.

Now the cat's got the hump and he's coming on mouthy. "Mac, you axin me to sleep in some muddahumpin fleapit with dese couple hundred udda sons a bitches? This ain't why I bodda'd escaping, see." I've told him, "I don't give a tailor-made toss, mate, you don't like it, there's the road." Fussy sod, Moody. Like name, like nature. Finally he's settled. "Guess it'll have to do." I've told him yes, Your sodding Worship, I'll bring your sodding caviar later. Mac.

He goes, "How about you pipe down with the sarcasm over there, wise guy. You're hurting my feelings."

I go, "How about you shove a pineapple chunk up your jacksie and take another dive off a bridge."

"Huh?"

"Here's a nickel. Phone your mum. She cares."

So then we've had a laugh. And in truth he ain't so bad. Type of chavvy plays silly buggers every now and again but you get that, so what. Young bloke's been in war, you show a bit of lenience if you're wise. Don't be a berk. Cut him slack.

Given name Pius, which as a nipper in school he's found an embarrassment, as you would, so he's called himself Jimmy, then Jack. Stevedore like his uncles, then some concatenation of misunderstandings, merchandise gone walkies, he blows town. Bare-knuckled and wrestled, went by Neck-break Mulvey. His mum's surname—Mulvey I mean, not Neck-break. Worked the freakshows. The fairgrounds. Coney Island in the summers. Got hurt in a scrap. Went to Mexico. Barker for a carnival only he's got caught with his leg over the Lobster Man's lady, had to do a runner a bit sharpish. As you do. Grifted around Jersey City, then I think he said Scranton. Few months in the nick. Didn't ask him too much. One of them blokes as takes a while to find his niche, you might say. You meet them. Don't mind. Ain't the worst.

Tells me he's "American Irish." A Mick *and* a Yank. Tell him dear oh dear, matey, that's a double setback when you're starting out in life. But look on the bright side, at least you're two pains in the arse at the same time.

Got to the Teatro, left them to it, the OC's inducted him. I've gone about the gaff seeing to this and that, took maybe twenty minutes. Jocks. Mancs. Pats. Canadians. Scousers. Nebraskans. Geordies. Taffs. Every type of Brummie ever discovered by Darwin. United bleeding Nations. And the racket.

Place fuller than a knocking shop on Good Friday in Dublin. Some of the blokes, I spotted fags to, others give us letters to send home to Mum or the missus, or some bit of frippet the missus don't know about. Kerfuffle

going on because there was a deserted Bavarian Corporal in the gaff three weeks. Don't recall his name now, Ludwig or something, or Franz, but the other lads mistrusted him, them saying he's a Jerry plant, him saying he's never, but he's always creeping about, asking questions, I've told him shut it. When I left, there's Moody playing bottle-top poker with a crew of Glaswegian AAs—anti-aircraft gunners. Four, five jocks, one of them even had a little harmonica, sounded like a rusty gate. But y'know.

They was calling him "Moon."

Moon Moody.

Peaceful enough scene, no word of a lie. I remember thinking, wouldn't mind kipping here myself for a bit.

You meet people make an impression. War ain't no exception.

All sorts in the world, mate.

Like the Book of Amos says.

"Moon Moody." Made me laugh. Dunno why.

So that Wednesday, Weldrick's brung to the Teatro. Fifteenth of March it was, day the Allies bombed Monte Cassino to stones. There's Weldrick making chums with Moody, cracking jokes, having laughs.

All tickety-boo, you might think. You'd be wrong.

Something was about to happen to the Contessa was no laughing matter at all. Hauptmann, you might say, made a move.

10

THURSDAY 16TH MARCH 1944
07.05 HOURS

First light at the Palazzo Landini.

Fireflies under pines.
Aromas of thyme and osmanthus drift in from the terrace, through shutters two hundred years old.

After he has showered, he doesn't dress but puts on a robe and shabby slippers, which he assumes once belonged to her late husband. Their lining has worn away; oddly that makes them more comfortable. Her soaps and towels are good. From Milan.

The medicine cabinet contains perfumes, personal items, bottles of pills. Women, bless their hearts, are always taking pills. Elise is the same. So was Mutti.

Toothbrushes. Nail polish. Emery boards. Make-up brushes. A tiny book of Dante that looks corrugated, as though it fell into water. Wooden rosary beads. An empty locket.

His habit is to shower very thoroughly before taking a bath. Cleaner that way. Less disgusting. So many soldiers are content to live in filth, like animals. Not Paul Hauptmann.

Turning the heavy, brass taps, he is pleased by the hot water, as it plashes into the oval of her over-large onyx tub. Grumbling pipework and the water itself give sudden coughing spurts, as though puking. The flow is dwindling to such meagreness that drawing the bath might take fifteen minutes, but the Palazzo Landini is so old that these little eccentricities and reluctances are to be expected. He is coming to think of it as having its own time zone.

Fourteenth-century, parts of the tower.

Imagine, such agedness.

The dovecot is said to have been designed by Borromini himself, the winter before he lost the commission for the Piazza Navona and went insane. Poor man.

On her weighing scales, he sees that he has lost two kilos. Not good.

Anxiety, he supposes. Anxiety and smoking. If only he could stomach this filthy muck the Italians call food. The Romans complain of being starved. They should see it as a blessing. He rehearses this quip—saying it aloud to his reflection—but decides against using it in tomorrow's briefing to the Fascist press. Tonally, it could be unhelpful.

The joke he attempted yesterday about his new lodgings did not land well. "Not every man can claim to have slept in a Contessa's bed."

Silence in the press room. Birdsong from outside.

The kind of banter one would reasonably expect Italian men to laugh at.

No one did.

"To clarify," he went on. "I am taking the Palazzo Landini, a not insignificant Roman building, into protection. To prevent looting and vandalism, and of course to protect the artworks. The Palazzo's collections must be safeguarded for the people of Italy. As must the building itself, which, while not of the first rank—" here he paused, took a sip of dusty water—"is not unimportant. Which returns us to the question of these criminal Allied air-bombings of the city. Your city. Mine. Mother city of the whole civilised world. These acts of cultural atrocity must cease."

As he shaves, he has the sense that a presence is watching from the haloes of steam behind his shoulder. A grizzled, shadowed face. Frail hands that clutch the mist. It is not an unknown feeling in an old house to which you're unaccustomed: the disapproval, the candlesticks' displeasure. Strange clicks in the night. The watchfulness of curtains. Why, even at home we can feel observed by dark windows. Too little sleep lately. Makes one susceptible. This morning, he will take an extra Benzedrine, a wakey-wakey pill, with his coffee.

He turns.

Only the writhe of the steam.

In the courtyard, seven peahens and their husband miserably pecking and strutting. He wonders where

they sleep, who takes care of them; if anyone has been feeding them since she left. Cruel, to abandon such oversensitive creatures to fend for themselves. Tomorrow he will have one of the secretaries at headquarters telephone the Zoo.

That new girl. Ann. Gets bored with the everyday tasks. Previously stationed in Gleiwitz. Speaks Russian, Italian.

She likes being given special requests, has a bit about her. Efficient. Shows discretion when setting up his weekly meetings with the doctor.

Good for morale to give a task requiring a bit of initiative to complete.

Gorgeous, the peacock's tails. A thousand glinting eyes. One sees them in ancient frescoes, reads of them in legend. Last night, drunk on her brandy, he dreamt of them giving him antediluvian stares, in some dark, cramped space that felt familiar. Soon he became afraid, made himself surface. Realising his Luger was in his hand, that he was about to blast the birds to pieces, he had quaffed down the dregs and passed out on the chaise longue, in a hot, wet stain he doesn't like to think about.

Somewhere, in cavernous darkness, scores of terrified eyes. He does not like to think about those either.

As he reclines in the bath, he looks out at the clouds. His shoulder is still stiff from an incident last Christmas, but the hot water seems to help, at least briefly.

In her kitchen, he brews coffee, gets French toast going on the skillet. Scrambles a couple of duck eggs, squeezes an orange the size of a grapefruit. But the juice is too sweet, so he stirs in the pulp of a lemon. Then a snifter of good, sharp schnapps. Lights a cigarette.

Could be worse.

Probably will be.

A lick of baking soda for his stomach acid.

Be at peace.

Those are the tiles on which her bare feet have walked.

That light from the opened refrigerator illuminated her body through a diaphanous nightdress.

Her fingertips on a teacup.

Her lips.

Are you fourteen, you bloody fool? Grow up.

Through the lattice, out in the garden he sees the three sentries on duty, young lads from the flatlands of Norddeutschland. Not the brightest, not even the bravest, but good-hearted farm boys, loyal in the way of country people. What he wants from them, he has explained, is silence and good order at all times. He is never to be disturbed except in cases of genuine emergency. They are to regard the Palazzo Landini as his private residence, not a barracks. If he needs something, which he won't, he will be sure to let them know.

"Keep your eyes on the street, boys, not the Palazzo."

"Sir."

"There is nothing *inside* the Palazzo that can hurt me."

He has the feeling they like him. He is not entirely wrong. Or right. They know he is a black marketeer, controls food supply in the city. Sometimes, he gives them a loaf or a can of corned beef. On a good day, a bag of pasta or a forged hundred-dollar bill. Liking him is a way of not starving.

Behind his back, they chuckle about his demands not to be interrupted in the house. Does he think they are fools, are blind? He has a woman in the Palazzo. No question about it. Wifey ordered back to Berlin, now he's moved in a mistress. Why, they have seen her, staring out, white and sad from the third-storey window in the turret. They have heard her crying or singing—it is hard to know which.

They are to cease referring to the mansion as the Palazzo "Landini," he tells them. If locals use that name—delivery boys, postmen—they are to order them at gunpoint to desist. Landini was a secret Communist, despite the lavish inherited wealth. Never lifted a finger in his overfed life. An ersatz radical of the most sickeningly hypocritical sort, only in a position to rebel because his ancestors were the prostitutes of Popes. His widow is a poseur, an imitation Red: sneering, superior, thinks she's Joan of Arc in haute couture. The Countess of cocktails and condescension, hiding in the Vatican with her coven of cowards. It is the *former* Palazzo Landini, now the Palace in Custody of the Reich. He is thinking of announcing a public competition—perhaps for Roman schoolchildren—to decide on its new name. An idea to lay before Berlin.

Palazzo Teutonico.

Palatium Germanicum.

Villa Heinrich Himmler.

Der Hitlerpalast.

So many exciting ideas to lay before Berlin.

This is what the Reich will require for the next chapter: ideas. These days of the blowtorch and butchery will end, as they must. Please God soon, may it not take long more.

Victory will come, its final birth pang will be terrible, will make all the previous horrors seem like light operetta. Christ, the dreadful suffering. All the poor boys dead. Another year of agony, and peace will be dragged weeping into the world. The lion shall lie down with the—what? He cannot remember the quotation. The lion shall lie down with the lie?

This morning he will send out a memorandum to every newspaper in Rome, suggesting but not stating—the people will think themselves clever enough to reach their own conclusions—that massive Wehrmacht reinforcements are on their way from the north. Then he will start listing her paintings and objets d'art before arranging for them to be shipped to Munich next week. Important to be fair; it is by any standard a remarkable collection, amassed over centuries, containing some very good things. Yes, the landings *sag* with the old tat you find in any minor Italian palazzo—candelabras, busts of nobodies, deservedly broken Etruscan pots—rubbish he can arrange to get shifted in the flea market at Porta Portese—but the pictures are first-class and very high second-class only. They will be appreciated, he senses, by the amateur painter who runs the Reich.

The Führer has a liking for alphabetical order. So, her pictures will be listed accordingly. Bassano, Carpaccio, Cimabue, Goya, Murillo, Pontormo, Savoldo, Tintoretto, Titian (x 2), Velázquez, Zurbarán. Might include the majolica hummingbirds. Do not hold back.

The portrait of the Contessa is not in the same league, but it has some aura that radiates a warning not to transgress too far. An imperturbability in the long-nosed, high-toned, mournful face, disdainful of its admirers, the spurn of the poise. Her skin the autumnal umber of burnished teak, the same colour as the picture's frame. The scepticism of the glance, the imperious composure, the unimpressible Roman eyes that burn you down. The strong backlit shoulders in their subtle aquamarine velvet. The slender necklace with its opal-studded crucifix. When the picture was made, her hair was shorter and blacker than now, a boyishness of style that suited her better. It intrigues him that the portrait shows her counting something off on her fingers, as though the artist had happened across her in mid-speech.

Already he has been through two of the seven lavender-scented wardrobes containing her gowns, by couturiers whose names he recognises. He appreciates good design, listens when his wife is speaking of her modelling days. Schiaparelli. Lanvin. Charles James. Madame Grès. Beautiful, the wardrobes themselves, no mere furniture, works of craft. Dark, rustling, mahogany chambers. Stepping into one—shoes off, naturally—and holding a gown, he had a sense of her physical being, its shape, size, and weight. As though holding not her gowns but her living, breathing body, as he placed them carefully on her immense bed, to be parcelled up in tissue paper and sent to Elise in Berlin. He has ordered fifty garment boxes to be requisitioned from Giuliano, Rome's finest tailor, whose windows will be kicked in if they are not delivered promptly. What a gift, what a surprise! Fifty stunning gowns. Elise will love them, a reminder of the career she happily surrendered to motherhood. They could never be afforded on the pittance he receives as pay. Gowns like this should be worn, not abandoned to the moths. A criminal waste. A decadence.

It shall be a lovely Easter surprise. A Reich train-carriage full of gowns. What woman could fail to be touched?

He walks the Palazzo. Tries to discern how it works. The old entrance on Via del Corso has been bricked up; the side street where the gates now stand has been renamed. On paper, it is a four-storeyed quadrilateral residence built around a courtyard with a belltower, a couple of outbuildings, three terraces of garden, one with statuary, another with fig trees and an ornamental well, stables converted into garages and a workroom for the art students who used to visit before the war. But the floorplan in his hand doesn't always correspond to actualities. Open the baize door of what you think is the private chapel, it leads to a two-room apartment. The broom closet contains the lower steps of a spiral staircase, apparently leading nowhere, in which birds have made their nests. Feathers on floorboards. Broken cloud-green eggshells. A pillared corridor that, when entered, seems to stretch away to thirty metres. But it is an illusion of perspective. Its true length is ten feet.

The Palazzo is a hotchpotch. A junk shop. But plenty of time to learn it. The Allies at Anzio will be driven into the sea. He'll be here at least a year, perhaps longer. If he pleases Berlin, Elise and the children might be allowed to return. The children gambolling on the landings, Elise shouting at them to stop. What a wonderland for a child to explore.

Most of the very old furniture would be too heavy to move out. Craftsmen built solidly in those distant centuries; not like now. Why doesn't she take better care of it? Christ, the dust, drapes of spiderweb, like Miss Havisham's house in *Great Expectations*. Enough work in the second-floor rooms alone to keep a good French polisher going a year. Shame to see such neglect. Privilege conveys duties.

If cleaned up, some pieces could fetch a good price from the right dealer. Her mahogany four-poster bed is the size of a tramcar. It gives him vivid, flickering dreams to sleep there, the thick black brocades, the ivory posts. A bed on a plinth. With a *roof*, for Christ's sake. Cherubs staring down at you from the ceiling as you try to sleep. He won't miss her bed when it's sold.

Next, the sideboards and gilded sofas? Yes, perhaps.

It would be agreeable to be rid of that old full-length mirror on the wall of the large, blue-silked dressing room off her boudoir. Dirty, scratched, badly needing re-silvering. But probably, in truth, it wouldn't be worth the bother. In dark moments he finds the thoughts of what it has seen arousing.

Peering from it now, a man still sometimes thought of as handsome, but greying rather than blonde, a bit gaunt rather than angular. Weary in the sepia light the looking glass seems to be sending out, like an old daguerreotype found in a case of curios. Some briskness of Mutti's eyes, now the glance of his seven-year-old son. As with all mirrors, if looked at long enough, reflecting unhelpful, over-speculative thoughts, opening portals to things best forgotten. Its bronzed-down brownness, its nicotine hue. He reaches out to touch it, like a child in a story, but it doesn't turn to water, or air, or smoke. The feel of the glass against his fingertips is cold.

Snap out of it, Hauptmann.

Raise your frequencies.

An expression from Gestapo training college. We must always raise our frequencies. Unsure what it meant, he had said it to Elise, and she laughed. The phrase has become part of their love code in front of the children. Perhaps we'll raise our frequencies tonight.

Gathering the Palazzo's Visitors' Book and a bundle of this morning's intelligence reports, he sprints up the long, steep stairs that lead to the music room, a pentagonal barrel-vaulted chamber hung with thirteenth-century tapestries. From the heavy teak cabinet, he selects a disc from her collection of gramophone recordings.

Rigoletto, conducted by Sabajno, with Lina Pagliughi as Gilda.

Settles back in the overstuffed armchair. Heavy cut-glass goblet of Scotch from her drinks tray. He opens the faded ledger to the pages from the time before war, flips through.

Dearest Jo, thank you for this lovely evening of music and conversation, and for your hospitality to my sister Bride and her friend, Elizabeth Clifford, on this long-awaited and happy occasion of their first pilgrimage to Rome. God bless you. Ever your friend.

Hugh O'F

My dear Contessa, profoundest thanks for once again receiving me here at your beautiful home tonight. The company was charming, the reception just exquisite. If there is any better medicine than good conversation and gaiety among friends, I don't know what it is, and I hope I never shall. Warmest gratitude and most affectionate best respects, as ever.

Frank D'Arcy Osborne,
His Majesty's Minister to the Holy See

Darling Jo, what a fabulous knees-up, you bring the whole world together. I laughed so hard my teeth near fell out. Thank you for asking me to sing the Donizetti, I so enjoyed it, hadn't sung publicly in ages, and for your piano accompaniment, which was beautiful, so sensitive. I am blessed beyond measure to call you my dearest friend. Oodles of love.

Delia K

Something in the messages irks him. He quaffs the Scotch, pours another. The record skips and hums on its needle. In all honesty, Tino Folgar as the Duke is a little disappointing. Too close to the microphone, timbre not quite perfect. But that is the only blemish.

Light moves in the room. Some defiance in the music lifts him. He opens the intelligence reports.

A medical student died under interrogation yesterday afternoon. Body dumped near the railway station. The number of no-go areas for German forces continues to drop; in September, there were sixty barricaded streets, at Christmas twenty, now there are fewer than a dozen. Subcommittee on Requirements has concluded that seventeen new sub-headquarters are needed throughout the city; properties to be identified, mainly derelict or abandoned sites, but there may arise a need for confiscations. Three partisans were hanged in secret last night, having resisted torture to the end, were deemed useless. In Testaccio fourteen further apartment blocks are under watch as of today; informants noticed suspicious arrivals and departures. Hidden recording devices have been installed by local Fascist operatives masquerading as electricity repairmen. Food rioters were beaten near the Mercato San Giovanni di Dio. Two thirteen-year-old boys daubing anti-Reich slogans on the walls of the Colosseum have been shot.

The aria is too rich for this time of the morning. He replaces it with a heavy shellac 78 of plainchant, the crackle of the stylus adding to the beauty, as the past comes into the room, a past so remote it permits itself to be sanctified. The great peace that comes with women or boys singing quietly.

A Bavarian deserter has been recaptured. Had been ejected from his hiding place by enemy escapees or had

chosen to go. Useful leads about the whereabouts of Allied safehouses—one of which may be large—were extracted before he was shot. Two undercover officers have been sent to reconnoitre. He died "cursing the Führer" and "you personally, mein Obersturmbannführer." There are fresh photographs of some of the Escape Line.

That grim-faced Irish priest. The British Ambassador in spectacles. The mournful widowed Contessa.

My hostess.

The transcript of their conversation reveals almost nothing, as usual. They know they are being recorded, and he knows that they know.

- I have been looking for a Book.
- Did you find it?
- On that shelf. You know the one I mean. Where we placed the English dictionary last month.
- How many books have we now?
- Hard to say. Seven thousand?
- Bloody hell.
- Yes, I know.
- What to do?
- [indecipherable]

He sits to her writing table. Flips opens the inkwell. Through the window he sees her peahens, plotting among the orange trees.

From all across Rome, the bells.

My dear Contessa Landini,

I enjoyed our recent encounter in the city but decided at the close that I should let you escape, the better to enjoy a huntsman's full victory next time.

It is an unusual experience to be written to on your own monogrammed notepaper, but I have no other at hand, alas. Furthermore, the paper is of such excellent quality—its heaviness is pleasing—that it seems a pity not to use it.

Your correspondent is a practical man.

I hope that you are managing to keep well and not finding Vatican life too much of a privation. I should myself not like to live at such close quarters with people who will soon be executed.

Try not to come to know them too well.

You will be wondering, I think, how I have had this letter delivered to you. An agent of National Socialism who is resident in the Vatican—of course there are many—has obliged me in this regard, and in others. Naturally I ordered the individual to be discreet when leaving the envelope on your pillow in Osborne's apartment. My messenger is a person you see every day, whom you think you know well. A figure you mistakenly believe you may trust.

You and I are enemies, Contessa, and you have caused me great harm, including the removal from my everyday life of my wife and two children. But we must rise above the personal, must we not? I write to reassure you on an important matter which, I am sure, must have worried you of late, in these troubled and unpredictable times.

I have taken your house and belongings under my wing. These senseless Allied bombing raids are the work of barbarians; your house must be watched in case it is attacked. There are also of course looters, vandals, squatters. Rome has more sorts of thieves than it has flavours of ice cream. The Palazzo Landini is a not insignificant element of the city's cultural patrimony. Indeed, I am so very determined on its protection, that I have made the house you shared with the late Count my personal lodging.

Yes, I am living here myself.

I should like you to think about that. When you are troubled in the night, when the bombs begin to fall on your squalid Vatican attic, I should like you to picture me, walking about your house and drinking your husband's wine.

Touching your belongings.

Blowing the dust off your books.

Sipping coffee in your garden.

Sleeping—well, you know where I am sleeping.

Isn't it pleasant that your late husband and I share the same forename, dearest Contessa? When I happen across a book signed "to Paolo with love," I allow myself . . . well . . . to daydream.

Your servants, I have had shot, except for your Jewish maid, who has been deported to Poland.

Perhaps you would care to come and discuss this house and its safeguarding with me one evening. I am sure that it has many precious secrets and memories. I would of course guarantee you safe passage. An officer of the Reich keeps his

word.

The time is fast approaching when you, like the Palazzo, will need protection. I am of course not at liberty to divulge military secrets, but it would not surprise many observers if overwhelming German reinforcements were on the march here from the north.

There will, of course, be a price for my protection. But you will not find my price heavy.

I do not need the names. Those, I already possess. You will only give me the movements of your colleagues in the Escape Line, or, as we both know it to be charmingly nicknamed, the Choir, and details of how each of them may be apprehended. Then, I shall have a Choir of my own.

I have learned one thing in war, Contessa, and I share it with you now: those whom you think your friends will not be loyal to you in the end.

We must swim in the same sea.

Believe me, dear Contessa,

Ever your caretaker,

Paul Hauptmann

Act III
I Fantasmi di Roma
The Ghosts of Rome

50 Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. 51 And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; 52 And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, 53 And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.

—MATTHEW *27: 50-53*

Underlined in a Bible owned by Giovanna Landini

11

FRIDAY 17TH MARCH 1944
07.07 HOURS

A page torn from an old guidebook, folded into a paper aeroplane, goes drifting on the swirls of Sirocco.

"It is not only that the area known as the Forum Romanum has sunk; rather that the street levels around it have heightened, century on century, as the layers of Rome amassed over time. The Forum seen by the visitor today is a long, jagged ravine, a partly man-made valley coursing through this storied metropolis of hills and ruins; a place—perhaps a nonplace, if such a word may be imagined—with a spectral atmosphere all its own."

Rubbish is often flung down into the Forum from the heaving streets above: cigarette boxes, unwanted clothes, used prophylactics, old mattresses. At one time, the nightly leftovers from the many tourist restaurants along the stretch, but the restaurants have closed now, and there are no leftovers any more; if there were, they would be sold on the black market.

In the eastern corner of the Forum, excavations were paused when the war came and abandoned when the air raids began. The bombings caused landslides and sinkholes, rendering the dig far too perilous for the archaeologists and the university students assisting them. They were ordered off the site, picks still stuck in the grit, mattocks and drag hoes abandoned near the thrown-down trowels. The parallelograms of pegged string to delineate dig-zones surrendered to the Roman weather.

The pointing finger and sun-parched slogan on a signboard still announce: "FORUM. DOWNWARD STEPS. VERY STEEP. PLEASE SLOW." But the steps have collapsed; the only way down now is by ladder. Passers-by, as though staring into a canyon or the depths of a drained reservoir, have the strange sight of birds flying below them.

For a while there was a nightwatchman but he was troubled by the realm of shadows and echoes that was his workplace. Sober, he heard sighing. Drunk, he saw Caesars. He began to skip shifts, was admitted to Rome's *manicomio*, the mental hospital. No one was appointed to replace him.

Cats roam the stones. Hulks of monuments. Ruined shrines. It is fancied by the locals that the ancient dead leave their tombs every midnight and stalk the dust of Rome, trailing curses.

In Lent this year, a new ghost was glimpsed.

By day Bruno lies low. At night he risks a walk. Surreal to him that the Colosseum is at the end of the side street, that the Forum he read about as a boy is what he sees when he awakens, its pillars, toppled towers, broken columns.

Sometimes he thinks that this is what the otherworld looks like. Hunger pangs return him to earth. Then come the strange feelings—that he *is* this place, somehow; that its emptiness is within him, that he has never been real. Take a grip, he tells himself. But it is like telling another man, who is smaller, more afraid, unable to speak. A twin you never realised you had.

Concrete sewer pipes a metre in diameter were to be installed on conclusion of the archaeologists' work but in the end only one pipe was delivered. Half-sunken by its own vast weight into the claypit behind the temple gable, it is covered in ivy and thorns and cannot be seen from the streets above.

Inside the cracked pipe, Bruno sleeps.

Lined with bracken to keep away the mosquitoes, the stony nest is at least quiet and dry, cool by day, tolerably warm by night, unlikely to be visited by snoopers. Barbed wire surrounds the entire site, which is the size of thirteen city blocks. Staked pictograms warn that the Forum and its environs are condemned; there have been earthfalls and there is the likelihood of more. Skulls-and-crossbones leer down on him as he breakfasts on grass, berries, lichens, frogs. He slips through the ruins to the stream.

In the pipe, a candle stub may be lit without being witnessed from the streets above. Rats have learned not to venture in; he is hard and accurate with his kicks. One dawn among the rubble he finds the rags of what may once have been a ballgown, thrown down from the avenue, sodden, torn almost in halves. From the tatters he shapes a pillow. Its veil makes a bandana. He prays a rosary for the woman who wore it.

He climbs the spiral stairs inside the tallest of the Forum's columns, thinking of his forefathers who climbed

masts in northerly gales, and through a spyhole watches the people on the street. Schoolgirls in red pinafores. German infantrymen on furlough. Priests. A man in the black uniform of a Gestapo Commander attends the barber's shop beside the ironmongery every third or fourth morning, giving the Nazi salute as he leaves it. The Romans glare at him hatefully as he returns to his car, an armoured black Mercedes with Swastika flags. You would think he'd wish to hide from them, but he flaunts his despicableness like a badge. Perhaps that is his way of hiding.

"Hauptmann," someone calls him, the name dropping from the street like a rotten fruit.

Nuns. Hawkers. Beggarwomen. Monks.

Women by moonlight standing under the lamp posts.

At night inside the pipe, Bruno riffles through the waterlogged old guidebook he found near the Temple of Saturn, but he cannot understand the words, nor even be certain of the language. Loose pages he forms into paper planes which he tosses into the writhing hot wind, watching them float away like promises.

But the etchings offer the pleasure of recognition, depicting things he sees every morning. The Curia Julia. Santa Maria Antiqua. The stream where he washes is the Lacus Juturnae, where Castor and Pollux are said to have watered their horses, but he cannot read the story, only recognises the picture as the representation of a place he walks through. It wouldn't be a surprise to see himself illustrated, a figure in the landscape. A relic awaiting digging up.

Postman. Dustman. Street-sweeper. Tailor.

His own language, like many languages—so he was once told by his grandfather, a schoolteacher and actor—has a children's chant made up of occupations. Often, they come to him again, as he watches the street, like the remembered windows of his home place and the cello of Grandfather's voice.

Soldier. Seaman. Baker's boy. Bishop.
Coal-digger. Shipwright. Cutter of hair.

The letters home he would write, if only he had a pen.

Grandad. I'm afraid. Hold my hand.

Yours, Bruno

One night he eats a mushroom he should not have eaten.

Grandfather. Mother. Caligula. Nero. Mussolini in a wedding dress. Seven Hitlers. Giuseppina and Elena trailing long, silken robes. The doomed parachutists he watched as they descended Rome's skies, through the zone of frescoed ceilings reproduced in the guidebook, sunbursts of deities and angels.

Next morning, the black Mercedes. Out steps the Commander. Hurries past a veiled Blue Sister collecting for the poor. He doesn't bother looking over his shoulder, through the barber's shop doorway.

The people's loathing follows him in like a smell.

"*Buongiorno, caro Comandante.* Your usual, sir?"

"Get on with it."

Hauptmann sits into the uncomfortable chair, its tatty red vinyl an affront, as Orlandi the barber pumps the foot-pedal, reaching out to wipe the mirror, now removing the comb and scissors from their grimy jars.

"Wireless, sir?"

"Anything but jazz. Get a move on, I'm busy."

The barber winds the dial. A piano nocturne emerges from the interplanetary shrilling.

"That," says Hauptmann. "Turn it up."

The melody is sombre, its starkness bearing beauty, and the snip of the scissors has deftness enough not to be an irritation. As usual, talk will be scant.

Oddly, this morning, the Nazi bastard seems on edge. His fingernails have been bitten. Dark circles around the eyes. A reek of stale cigar smoke arising from his tunic, through the pleats of the oilcloth gown. Bells toll for eleven. His wristwatch, usually dead accurate, is a minute and a half slow. A detail you'd notice but not the sort of thing you'd point out.

"Hot towel, sir?"

"No time."

"Five minutes, no more, sir. A lot of my gentlemen find it sets them up for the day, sir. Soothes the skin. Opens the pores. Wonderful to feel truly clean."

"Be quick about it. I have appointments in the city."

"Of course, sir. You won't regret it, sir. Raise your head for me a little if you'd be so kind, sir."

The towel is folded around his face. Seat peacefully tilting. Eucalyptus, musk, cloves. Steaming flannel. The barber's kneading knuckles through folds of warm cotton. Sleepmaking. Drowsy. Lulling piano chords, low, left hand, minor, luscious. The sounds of the day getting going, children on the pavement, a ting as the door opens, tramcars passing, perhaps Rome is not so unbearable after all. What was it the English poet said? "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven." The kettle coos languidly as it returns to the boil.

Sprightly fingers unfold the towel from around his soothed face. That was almost as good as a long night in the meadowlands of sleep.

Outside, the cheerful sentry doing duty as bodyguard salutes him briskly and hands him an envelope.

"Note for you, sir."

"From?"

"A nun, sir. Passing by. Blue Sister, she was."

"What nun? She gave a name? How did she know I was here?"

"I don't know, sir." He shrugs. "I didn't ask."

Commander Hauptmann,

Like many shadowy old buildings where there have long been stories of strange apparitions, Palazzo Landini has also known earthlier presences. Down the years, we have battled infestations of one kind and another.

Wasps' nests. Flying ants. Mice by the multitude. A burrow of violin spiders—despite their lovely name they are highly venomous—in the well shaft. Cockroaches. Woodworm. Moths on old tapestries. Two winters ago, a horned viper and her hatchlings in one of my wardrobes.

One difficulty is that the sewer far below the street leads circuitously to a subterranean cesspool, which drains into a lost tributary of the Tiber. Certain animals seem to regard the crumbling pipework as a two-way thoroughfare. Thus, river rats have been snared in the traps that adorn my cellars and attics. These monsters the size of a fox would make you doubt the existence of God. Their fangs are the length of coffin nails.

You shall find that the house contains many surprises.

Palazzo Landini could tell a story or two.

These vermin, of course, did not know they were vermin.

Whereas you, Commander Hauptmann, know nothing else about yourself.

The knowledge sucks you hollow.

You are nothing.

You know this.

If you lived a thousand years in Palazzo Landini, you would yet be merely its parasite.

A lungworm. A louse. A maggot in darkness. Your wildest aspiration is to one day become a slug.

The thought of you oozing your secretions in my home is appalling. But Palazzo Landini survives its pests. You nonentity.

I have scraped better than you off my shoes after a walk in my garden.

How ashamed your parents must be.

You embarrassing stain.

The seat of my ancestors will be here long after you and your ilk are forgotten.

You excuse for a man.

God pity your mother.

With sincerity,

Contessa Giovanna Landini

On the second floor of the Palazzo he goes to the armoury, but the ornamental mace bolted to the wall over the fireplace proves impossible to dislodge, so he descends to the foyer and hurries to the cubbyhole beneath the staircase where the bag containing her golf clubs is stashed. Pulling out a seven iron and a hefty wooden driver, he re-ascends through the Palazzo, asking himself which of the rooms to start in.

It is difficult to choose between the library and the satin-papered withdrawing room but in the end, he chooses the latter, it contains more furniture and breakables and has rare stained-glass windows, possibly designed by Moretti, showing sunflowers and seahorses in a field of fleurs-de-lys, the ancient crest of the Landinis.

Smashing the panes, one by one, he moves steadily around the room, using the butt of the seven iron to bash out the lead and the head to scrape the satin from the walls. The sentries down in the courtyard watch the rainstorm of shattered greens and blues, barbs and spurs of indigo, shards of glinting scarlet, stepping back from the cascade in a new kind of fear, stumbling through the cluster of peahens. The can of petrol he demanded of them has left spills down their uniforms, so they are afraid to light cigarettes, or they would.

Above them, the French doors on the stone balcony are stamped open. The burning piano is pushed down into the courtyard in a cloudburst of sparks and wiry groans, followed by the kicked-apart lute. Now books, hails of books, heavy tomes, hefty hardbacks. Choir-books a metre tall. Then the shelves the books lived on. Then the lamps by which the books were read.

Romans gather in bafflement outside the gate, faces shining in flamelight. Cries of "Shame," "Death to the Nazis," "Long live the Allies," until from the room beyond the balcony he lets loose with a machine gun and they scatter. Steaming cartridges rain down on the sentries.

When finally he appears in the hall doorway, he is shirtless and wet, fuel can in right hand, lighted candlestick in left. It doesn't take long for the mound of books to start smouldering, blackening, wilting, but they are reluctant to burn, fizzing back at him in resistance, until the dregs of the can are gone, and he orders another from the sentries, slopping it in seven gushes over the smoking pile.

"Radio to headquarters and get a photographer," he orders. "I want pictures in all the early editions of the newspapers tomorrow."

"Pictures, sir?"

"Of this vandalism perpetrated by Communist insurgents. You saw them enter the property. Get going."

12

SATURDAY 18TH MARCH 1944
06.30 HOURS

Shortly before dawn, ninety German soldiers move into the back streets surrounding the abandoned Opera House. A further eighty are already in place on neighbouring rooftops. Two tanks are in position to the south. Tracker dogs. Mounted police.

The tip-off is thought reliable.

A Heinkel helicopter buzzes into position above the chimneystacks of the Teatro, searchlight sweeping the dark spaces between the flues and black turrets. The beam is broad and brilliant, a marvel to see. Thrown by a movie lamp looted from Cinecittà studios, strapped to the machine's undercarriage as a trophy and a terror, already it has entered the city's folklore.

Touched by the beam, you will die within a week. There is no hiding from what the Romans call "Hauptmann's Eye."

Residents watching from the windows of apartment blocks now see him arrive. He steps unhurriedly from the Mercedes, checks his watch. The advance guard are sledgehammering the corrugated-iron fence around the Teatro, but it has been buttressed by barricades of concrete blocks and is reluctant to give. Four troops bring a battering ram. But the fence won't fall.

Hauptmann beckons to something they can't see.

"The Colossus," a vast machine designed for hefting the stanchions of pontoon bridges, growls up Via Arcangelo Corelli, so huge that its treads scrape the walls on both sides of the street, snapping off window shutters and gargoyles. Its cab is only the size of a coffin, but its claw could hold a car.

Hauptmann steps backwards into a doorway as the monster advances, its yellow-toothed heavy pincer poised high.

The fence is wrenched apart, beaten down, crushed, tossed like a mangled carcass by a Tyrannosaurus rex. Over the rubble, through the ditches and moats, the soldiers advance behind it, rifles aimed. The Teatro's doors crumple, no match for the beast. Hauptmann himself is first in.

Machine gun in hands, he moves swiftly, efficiently, with the grace of the prizewinning school gymnast he was in his teens.

Through the ruins of the foyer, up the steps, along the crush bar landing, troops with loudhailers calling, "Escapees, surrender, the block is surrounded."

The parterre stalls are dark and empty. He gestures "Up, up," and the snatch-squads begin ascending through the velveted back stairs, now the dress circle, setting off the alarms, kicking through the tripwires, now the upper circle, grand circle, gods. Checking for booby traps, searching the boxes, every aisle, nook and alcove, in the programme sellers' booths, the lavatories, the cupboards, beneath the seats.

"No escapees, *mein Kommandant.*"

"There must be."

"There aren't."

In backstage, Hauptmann and seven troops smash open the locked dressing rooms and carpentry workshop. Trawling the flies, beneath the stage, another sweep through the wings. Near the prompter's box the Commander finds the switch labelled "House Lights" and throws it.

Whiteness floods the Teatro.

The scores of empty seats.

Draped across the proscenium, a banner daubed so hurriedly that its red and blue paint is still dripping:

WILLKOMMEN, JERRY NUMBSKULLS
ENJOY THE SHOW

Thirty-seven minutes previously, the Northumbrian OC gave the order to wake the men. "We're twigged, get your gear, move out, shift your arses." Shock fell on them like a punch. Some vomited.

"You'll go with your box mate. To the address on this card. When you've read the card, eat it. Ninety seconds. Good luck."

Some were reluctant to leave, spoke of a fight to the end. Moody was among their noisy and disconsolate number, until Weldrick took him by the elbows and pleaded for sense.

He had come quickly to like Moody, found him witty and watchful, appreciative of privacy, as was Weldrick himself. Often, they played chess, which Moody usually lost, always claiming to have done so on purpose—"to boost your morale"—but not bothering to try that too hard. He had read a bit: Jack London and Twain, cheap cowboy novellas, the Bible. He was of a type that any man or woman Weldrick's age has met, the oddly magnetic dissembler who has constructed several selves, probably to hide the one he doesn't like. The man pretending to be stupider than he is. Immodest, sardonic, a loather of the practical jokes wrought on each other by the escapees—such loathing, for Weldrick, being the mark of a trustable person—scathing in his dismissals, he could also be roughly kind, a good listener when not bored, knowledgeable on distant cities and the ways of the world, how things were done and felt in faraway places, by different peoples, at distant eras, a sharer of cigarettes and blasphemies of the OC and all his ilk. The OC's name was Hugh Moloney, Moody referred to him as "Huge Baloney." You often felt you should dislike Moody but it was hard to.

There were younger men here, Weldrick reminded him, war-burnt hotheads, gun-crazy. They didn't stand a chance against the numbers that must be coming. Jerry would torture them. Imagine their mothers back home.

"The hell with their mothers."

"They look up to you, Moon. They'll do what you say."

"The hell with me too."

"You don't mean it."

"Sure I do."

"Come on, get your stuff, Moon, let's go."

"Just a second."

It was Moon who painted the banner and raised it over the stage, then told the Northumbrian OC he'd never liked him, just in case there was room for doubt.

"Moody, I'm ordering you, don't give me any trouble."

"Stick your orders where the monkey stuck the nuts."

The address on their card turned out to be a garage, a mechanic's shop, in Prati. They walked there in single file, as was part of the basic evasion-training they'd been given, taking the colonnaded streets wherever possible, for an approaching enemy finds it hard to see you on a colonnaded street, the OC told them. If he does, it will be at the last minute, you're prepared, he's not. Always—repeat always—be on maximum guard outside your safehouse.

"We heard you the first time," Moody said.

The mechanic, Aldo, is a jumpy piece of work who looks as though life has been tough on him. Large-biceped, surly, slow to speak. It is a stock in trade of Moody's bad jokes that all Italians are chatterboxes—he seems stumped by his new landlord's silences.

Aldo shows them to the loft above his forecourt, a dismal, low-raftered garret, reached by a wheeled ladder disguised as a tool rack, through a hatch door disguised as a ceiling panel. There is one filthy dormer window and one enamel jug for washing and shaving. Hammocks have been hung for them. There's a bowl of lumpy polenta and some cheese. A bucket whose purpose is obvious reeks from the corner.

"Darling," Moon deadpans to Weldrick. "Take a seat on the divan. Glass of champagne?"

Aldo gives a low-lidded, cold-eyed stare. Indicates by gestures that they are to be quiet, that he must return to his work. They should feel welcome to lie down, go to sleep.

Weldrick washes, as best he can, uses the bucket, takes to one of the two sagging hammocks.

"That wop's in it for the money," Moody says.

"So what if he is?"

"It's better. He won't rat us out, he'll lose his dough if he did."

"Right."

"Unless the goons offer more. Then he'll sell us like his mother."

"Let's deal with that then, Moon."

“Let’s deal with that then.”

“Wish we brought the pack of cards.”

Moody produces it from his pocket.

Says, “Weldrick, Weldrick, Weldrick. Where would you be without the Moon? Aces high, dipshit?”

“Every time.”

“Stakes?”

“Two smokes a card.”

“Let’s make it interesting. Say three.”

“Deal.”

They play until Moody is owed fifteen hundred smokes, then go doubles or quits on the best of a final three hands, aces low, which Weldrick wins, to Moody’s consternation.

“You cheated.”

“Moon, I didn’t.”

“I see it in your eyes, Weldrick, you’re a cheat and a finagler. The Moon sees it all, mac. The Moon sees it all. You can’t always see the Moon, mac, but the Moon is always there.”

“The Moon is literally full of literal shit.”

“Never took you for an astronomer, Bobby boy. But you might be onto something there.”

At midnight, they are awakened by the chock of the rotors approaching from the north-east.

The light of Hauptmann’s Eye as it roams the rooftops.

13

MARIANNA DE VRIES
NOVEMBER 1962
Written statement in lieu of an interview

So, the two men I would come to know as Moody and Weldrick were hiding in that attic. Many raids took place over the 17th and 18th of March. Rome was in panic. The danger was about to increase.

You will know that those of us who were central to the Escape Line had formed ourselves into what appeared to be—in fact was—a chamber choir.

By this pretext, we could meet regularly, unmolested and unremarked. There are of course many choirs in the Vatican. We hid in the open.

Our belief, based on intelligence supplied by a person in a position to know, was that Hauptmann's Gestapo, with the assistance of Fascist collaborators within the papal walls, had placed covert listening devices in numerous rooms throughout the quarter square-mile of Vatican City. In Osborne's apartment, we could communicate by mumbles and coughs but there were times when that was not enough. So, our method was to meet for choir rehearsal, twice weekly, not in the apartment but in a derelict building used to store unwanted church statuary, not far from the basilica. While singing, under cover of whatever music we were able to make, we exchanged notes, diagrams, instructions, details, on the missions we had approaching. These missions we code-named "Rendimenti," the singular of which is "Rendimento," the Italian word for an outcome or a yield. At the start of our work, we ran one or two a week. By mid-March, they were becoming almost daily occurrences.

Our numbers and our spirits were depleted since Delia Kiernan and her daughter, Blon, had left us, as had the living lighthouse that was Enzo Angelucci. We missed Delia's indomitability. In a sense, she had been our conductress. But onward we plodded, and onward we sang, those with musical talent and those, like me, with none.

My memory for some details of this troubled time is not reliable but let me take you to a moment I recall with perfect clarity, the night after the raid on the Teatro. We choristers were in emergency meeting in our rendezvous room, up seven flights of broken stairs in that old storehouse of broken baptismal fonts and struck-off saints. The piece we were pretending to rehearse was Vivaldi's "Cum Dederit" from *Nisi Dominus*, in truth too difficult a cantata for an assembly like our own to dream of taking on. Whenever I hear it, I am returned to that fear-besotted night.

Tempers were thinning. Notes had been exchanged with some urgency. The Opera House raid had found no escapees on the premises but clearly there had been an informant. This was troubling. More generally, there were too many escapees hiding in Rome, and no sign of the flood abating. In recent weeks, several dozen Books, as we termed them, had been recaptured by the Germans; against international law some had been interrogated and denied food. Our codebook had been stolen from Osborne's apartment, as had the spare key to the gate on our corridor. A van we sometimes used on Rendimenti had been burnt. A note from the Gestapo Commander, Hauptmann, had been left on Jo Landini's bed; its writer claimed it had been delivered to her by a secret agent of the Nazis.

Intelligence and one's own eyes told one that collaborationism was growing among the Romans, some of whom felt all political systems to be in essence the same and were more concerned by the lack of food than by the—to them—somewhat distant question of which flag would fly over their starvation.

I am not myself a mother, but only a psychotic would fail to understand how a mother must feel when her child has gone hungry for a week. The air raids had caused anti-Allied feeling to soar. We were troubled by the glut of forged British and American currency deluging Rome. A criminal known as "*il Cacciavite*," "the Screwdriver," was rumoured to have been behind it, but his own wife had betrayed him to the Nazis as vengeance for his infidelity and they had given him an appalling death. Mistress of a corrupt monk whose *nom de guerre* was "Nemo," the widow now commanded the dead husband's gang in person, or so it was widely whispered—tales of her cold-heartedness and violence were legion—but we were in the dark as to how she and

the others in the forgery operation were manufacturing such vast amounts. You would be offered a fifty-dollar bill as change by a cigarette girl. While a slice of pizza cost seven million lire.

We suspected the involvement or complicity of Hauptmann but had no evidence. Whatever the case, it meant monies we smuggled for the work of the Choir could become almost worthless overnight. A million lire would not buy a newspaper or a coffee.

So, a tough, tense time in the rehearsal room that evening, and Vivaldi not making it easier. Sam Derry with customary stoicism toiled at the wheezy harmonium, John May, a gifted musician, played his saxophone—he called it his "axe"—quietly and beautifully, sometimes alternating it with a chord or two he had learned on a mandolin he had found. The singing was supplied by Jo Landini and me. Monsignor O'Flaherty, our *primus inter pares*, seldom sang.

His glances that night were arrows, his silences darkly furious; he was convinced that this room was now bugged like so many others; if one of us committed the sin of mistakenly uttering a word, he gestured and mouthed and stabbed at the air like a Roman policeman drawing your attention to the red traffic lights. Dear Jo gave it back to him with some force, also silently.

It is a surreal experience to see two people having a spat without words. One might think it would be amusing. It is not. I have been told that, in the Cistercian order, which is silent, the monks use a sign language they have devised down the centuries. Suffice to say that some of the communications between Jo and Hugh that night were not Cistercian.

She of course had been under a tremendous strain. I find it hard to express in words the sickening shock for her of Hauptmann taking over her house and vandalising part of it. There was the feeling that he might destroy it, room by room, as he and his henchmen destroyed their prisoners, bone by bone. There was mainly the horror of his being there at all. The Palazzo had been in Jo's husband's family for centuries; it was the place where she had been happiest, was perhaps even an embodiment of that happiness. Jo had immense stoicism and rarely spoke of the savage hurt but one could see it was there and feel its never-ending smoulder. Hauptmann's act was an invasion within an invasion. As he surely knew. The Palazzo was no mere home. It was Jo Landini's past. One sensed its loss assail her again in the rehearsal room that night.

There came a moment when the voices of those of us seated at that long, dented table stuttered to a halt. Derry and May ceased, too. The harmonium sighed as though dying. I was reading a note from Hugh about the raid on the Teatro but his handwriting, usually neat, could be untidy when he was angry. At that moment it was almost undecipherable.

Frustration stalked the room like a phantom of a jilted lover at a wedding banquet. I became aware that someone was still singing.

Turning, I received a shock that I still remember.

Standing in the doorway was Blon Kiernan.

THE VOICE OF DELIA KIERNAN
8TH JANUARY 1963
From transcript of BBC research interview, reel 2,
conducted White City, London

You think fighting Fascism is difficult?

Try being a mother.

Parent of someone in their teens?

Goodnight.

They talk to you like you're Guy Fawkes and they're the Houses of Parliament.

On another day, you face the Bolshevik you somehow gave birth to.

You're on eggshells. Creeping. Afraid to say a word in case you make a boggins of it.

Offer them your very most—the greatest, furthest compromise you are able to stretch to—they'll trouser it as their starting point and look bored.

First, I'll take everything you've got, Mam. Now, let's talk.

What happened was this, and I'll tell you no lie. "A family contretemps" is what Jane Austen might have termed it.

Jane Austen was not from Claremorris, County Mayo.

Alas.

A lot of things might have turned out differently if she were.

At the time when Blon and I came out of hiding in the Vatican and returned ourselves to the Irish legation,

my miss was nineteen, an age when difficulties between mothers and daughters are not unknown. But this was special and unusual.

Small things, mostly. Contradicting you. Smart remarks. She knew how to ring your bells.

Being deliberately late for meals, or late home from college—she'd a special dispensation to attend lectures at the Università di Roma La Sapienza, where many offspring of diplomats studied, but was supposed to be home at the legation by an agreed time every evening and not to be out after curfew. Switching on every lamp in the residence when we'd been warned by the blackout wardens and Fascist police to switch them off. The fecking place would be lit up like Broadway. And, in Tom's book, the evilest crime since Satan's first disobedience, "deliberately wasting hot water." Tom regarded the use, preferably the re-use, of bathwater, as a matter of morality. Blon went to war by loofah.

There was that many baths run, we could have washed a battleship.

I'd a fair idea what was going on.

Blon disapproved of me leaving the Escape Line, saw it as spinelessness. She'd tell me as much during a fight. And Blon in a fight was a force to be reckoned with. You were a surrenderer, a shirker, a deserter, a neutralist, turned your back on your friends, all the rest. Unlike all people aged nineteen, you'd no principles or conscience; if you had, you were a coward who wouldn't live by them. At the age Blon was then, you don't understand that cowardice is the reason why the human race is still knocking around. The dodos were probably not cowardly.

Her squabbles with yours truly, I was well able to brush off. My father, God be good to him, fought outlaws and rustlers in the Klondike as a youngfella and he over there from Ireland trying to make his fortune. Which he did. The insult isn't coined would knock a feather out of a Claremorris Murphy. I'd let a roar out of me sometimes, she'd roar back, it was nothing. The victim she went to town on was poor Tom.

What made it worse, as it does in these situations, was that she and Tom idolised each other, as a father and daughter will. She loved him. Admired him. Flailed him to flitters. He'd stand like a gom and take it. Love is a terrible cuss of a thing. That's why civil wars are more violent. And there was a lot on Tom's mind at the time, his task was to keep drilling away for Ireland down the mines of diplomacy. One aim was to secure a private audience with Cardinal Ventucci, who was whispered to have the Pope's ear on matters of state. Well, finally, after months of backing and forthing, the date was made. It would be a big occasion in Tom's career, a feather in his cap, an arrival on the diplomatic scene. I got him the morning suit laundered and the top hat brushed. Gave him a silver tiepin I'd been saving for our wedding anniversary, with his initials on it. He told me to buy a new frock for myself, in the smartest boutique in Rome. "Hang the expense, Delia," he said. Not a phrase Tom used often.

The morning comes anyway. Cardinal Ventucci's driver arrives at the residence. Every detail of a visit like this is worked out in advance, who will shake hands with whom, the exchange of gifts, the conveying of courtesies on behalf of the different heads of state—even which side will drive which. The Vatican has its own rules. Like Fairyland, Johnny May used to remark. No motor car belonging to a foreign power is permitted to enter the grounds of the Holy Office. So the Cardinal's chauffeur will collect us, and here he comes now. Tom and I in our hall, with the official photographer, ready to go. All fine and dandy.

Where's Blon?

I send the maid up the stairs. She returns with mixed tidings.

La Signorina Blon is in the bath.

Tom is silent.

Five minutes. Seven.

Photographer getting antsy. As only an Italian can. Like a fella with bedbugs in his socks.

Driver gaping hard at the watch.

There's a way the Italians have of gawping at a watch would set every nerve in your body astray, and they pointing and shrugging and going mad with the eyebrows and stalking up and down like they're in an opera and trying to get noticed by the critics. Only nine in the morning and I'm gasping for a gin.

Down the stairs comes Blon in her lovely dark-green Matilda Etches dress and coat, but without a hat.

This will be an occasion of formal protocol, she's after been told only fourteen thousand times. Her father orders her back up to get a hat on her.

"I don't have a suitable hat," says she.

"Borrow one of your mother's."

"I'm not borrowing one of hers—" the withering way she said *hers*—"our heads are different sizes. Mine is larger."

And she letting the significance of that fact hover.

"Find one," he tells her. "I don't care if it's a bloody fez."

"I'd borrow one of your own," she says to him, "but you'll be talking through it. As usual."

A diplomat first and last, Tom lets the low punch go, even manages one of his tight grins as she departs. A few minutes pass. Down she fetches, still in the dark-green frock, now with a hat on her—a straw boater—but without rosary beads or gloves.

"Go and get your beads and gloves, love," says he. "We don't want to be late."

Away with her. Tom lights a cigarette. Rehearsing his remarks beneath his breath. A few minutes, and down she saunters, beads and gloves in hand, now wearing a silk blouse, very smart shoes, and a pair of trousers.

They were presentable. Conservative. Navy-blue. Tweed. Unfortunately, they were also trousers.

Women didn't wear trousers at a formal occasion, as Blon knew right well. One thing working in a garden, say, or on an assembly line making munitions. Not meeting Cardinal Ventucci.

A dress was required to be worn of ladies when meeting His Eminence. His Eminence would be wearing one himself.

"Get up those blasted stairs and change, miss," her father orders. "I warn you."

She comes back in a different pair of trousers.

Well, that seemed to be that.

As my daddy used to say, quoting some poet or another, "Then burst forth war's red lightning."

Poor Tom appeared as though about to come out in hives of pure rage. He wasn't the type of fella lost his temper terribly often, God love him; in fact, he sometimes seemed to have a difficulty *finding* his temper. As a result, when he lost it, it stayed lost.

"You have food," he said, "when people are hungry."

"This again," Blon sighed, as though bored, and she not quite examining her fingernails or venturing a yawn, but the slow way she donned the gloves conveyed, as it was intended to convey, the shattering weariness of being loved by the inadequate.

"And a bed," says her father. "And servants. A weekly allowance. A *swimming pool*, for the love of Christ. And every last thing you could ever want in this world. Damn-all swimming pool *I* had at your age, I may tell you that for nothing. And the rank impertinence and lip out of you."

"I didn't ask for a swimming pool."

"Did you not?"

"No, I didn't."

"I'll swimming-pool you in a minute, miss. You cheeky little rip. And you treating this bloody place like a hotel."

Tom really did think that he had originated this phrase, which to him summed up everything of youth's ingratitude, malice, and exorbitance. He was of that Irish generation that was unable to treat even a hotel as a hotel, frequently apologising to bootblacks and waiters for having troubled them.

"With one difference," says Blon. "In a hotel, I'd be happy."

And out the door she stalks. Down the steps. Down the driveway.

Takes off the wretched hat, flings it into the swimming pool as she passes. Hops onto the gardener's bicycle. Disappears.

THE VOICE OF SIR D'ARCY OSBORNE
14TH DECEMBER 1962
From transcript of BBC research interview, reel 3,
conducted Via Giulia 66, Rome

At this time, the Boche had a chokehold on food supplies in the city. My redoubtable manservant John May was digging what we call in Italy an "*orto di guerra*"—a wartime allotment—in a zed-shaped patch of scrubland off the western Vatican gardens, not too far from the radio station. The plan was to grow vegetables there, chiefly artichokes and beans. Quite apart from these desirables, the *orto* might provide an equally useful commodity: something to keep the Devil off one's back. Hard, physical work is a rest to the mind. One had plenty one needed to rest from. Hauptmann's lackeys in the Fascist press told us every day that German forces were advancing from the north. The Escape Line was strained to the extreme.

Dearest May, a cockney born and bred, was not the most gifted agriculturalist. Watching his attempts to till could be a troubling, if in an odd way uplifting, experience. Muttering blasphemies at his shovel, cursing the profusions of stones and broken mosaic it encountered, he sowed seed like a drunkard throwing confetti. The English genius for gardening is more productive of dahlias than edibles. In May, not even those.

Every morning, when my more formal duties on behalf of His Majesty had been expedited—or avoided, May quipped—and the Sisyphean work for the Escape Line had somehow been done, I would join Farmer May

outside in the *orto*. There we would dig for an hour, sans conversation, perhaps pausing for a smoke, before returning to what I liked calling—to irk him—our husbandry.

Raking a little, maybe, heaping, shifting earth. There might be a little badinage. Two-chaps-together type of thing. I would call him a troglodyte. He would call me a turnip. Happy times in the midst of bad ones. One morning we unearthed a wooden crucifix, another, an Etruscan pot. One never knew what our excavations would give up, that was part of the fun of the thing.

But I stray.

Miss Kiernan's unheralded arrival back in the Vatican provoked what the Italians term "*un magnifico battibecco*." How would one say it in English? A terrific squabble. The dear child refused to leave, wouldn't listen, saw being requested to as a climbdown. "Don't you tell me what to do. I am nineteen years old." Headstrong. Stubborn. Like talking to a rock.

Wilde's witticism that every woman becomes her mother is not true in every case. But in Blon's, a certain similarity was discernible.

The Monsignor wanted her out. Pure and simple. No compromise. One couldn't have a girl of nineteen knocking about the Vatican unchaperoned, heaven knew where it would lead. One of the most useful diplomatic masks is the one expressing affectionate scepticism towards what has just been proposed—it may only be deployed between good friends—and this was the one I donned. I put it to Hugh that, after all, the great majority of our immediate neighbours were men of the cloth, sworn to high piety and chastity, to prayerfulness and contemplation, therefore unlikely to prove much danger, perhaps indeed temptation, to Miss Kiernan. But that did not appear to convince him. Au contraire.

It was a difficulty for him that she did not have her parents' permission to be with us and that they wanted her home without delay. My dear Hugh was many excellent things but not a man of the world, could perhaps, dare one say it, be a little strait-laced. Major Derry, a stickler, was in that respect cut from the same cloth. One didn't have women in a barracks; their presence would disconcert. It would be like housing the Marylebone Cricket Club in a nunnery. The Contessa and Miss de Vries he appeared to regard as honorary men, a promotion of which they were unaware and for which they had not applied. It was but one bead in the glorious mystery of his singularity that when dear Sam referred to "the chaps" he meant everyone living in the apartment. Which in any case was not a barracks but, in effect, the British embassy. War does odd things to the vocabulary.

But Blon, being Blon, was impossible to shanghai into chaphood. Woman she was and woman she remained. It was a bit of a to-do. Sides were taken.

She cannot remain here, was Derry's and Hugh's view. She must return to her parents as a matter of urgency. Miss de Vries and the Contessa took a more flexible line, if sometimes, I felt, more for the sake of sex warfare than practicalities. Also, they liked outflanking Sam, it had evolved into a sort of pastime. He could become ruffled, which seemed to please them; the more he departed from his imperturbability, the more they needled at it deliciously. "You are so very attractive when you're irritable, Sam," Miss de Vries used to say. Which, I may add, was not untrue.

Blon had resided with us before, they pointed out. That was different, Sam countered. Delia had been here to tyrannise her, "like the rest of us," into obedience. On it chuntered, back and forth, like a dreary game of tennis—Blon must remain—Blon must play the prodigal daughter—until finally I supervened, saying I would telephone to Blon's father, my friend and fellow diplomat, offering to take the girl under my personal wing, she could assist in the allotment work with May and me if she wished. An extra pair of hands would be useful.

The truth was that I was fond of Blon and her parents, had come to see her as a sort of niece. She was a very fine young person and a credit to them. If a little difficulty had blown up at home, well, that happens from time to time. When it does, friends support. Provide a safety valve and a welcome. Also, Blon was by now a guest whom I thought of with warmth. I am not given to evicting my guests.

I am unmarried, as you know, but we are all part of that rather strange contrivance, the family, perhaps the only truly Communist institution that will ever exist, given the imperfectability of the human being. As a boy, I got into plenty of trouble, at school and elsewhere. Drawn to it, one might say, like a trout to the fly. So, I knew what it was to be young and a bit lost and uncertain. As perhaps every young person does from time to time growing up. Many an older person too if we are honest.

Give the young a little space into which to unfurl and they'll come good in the end. There is wisdom in not fighting for the observation of every last comma in the rulebook. Better not to conduct human relationships in the manner of a bumptious French train inspector issuing a probably spurious fine. As we say, in Italian, *fate silenzio.*

Make silence.

Give things time.

Her father and I exchanged telephone calls, and, in the end, the good man gave his consent. Blon would

remain with us in the Vatican for a while. Tell you what, she was a worker. Good as any man. I daresay better. What Blon had—and one doesn't always get it with a youngster or with anyone else—she was a finisher of any task she commenced. Ask her to weed a patch of land, it was weeded, double quick. Fixing fences. Chopping firewood. Hauling barrows of dung. Didn't ask questions, didn't offer observations. Not a talker. But my word, could she dig.

Good, strong hands. Stubborn. One liked her intrepidity. Tell Blon, pull up a dead tree, she'd go to the root, burn it out. Worked till she had blisters, never gave a plea or plaint. Sunshine, rainstorms. She bashed on.

A good-hearted, somewhat restless, intelligent young woman. What used to be called a tomboy. A little lost. Not yet herself. No bad in her that I ever saw.

There was one and only one matter that caused a minor imbroglio between us. Blonnie, as I called her, let it be known to me that certain of her friends at the university had strong anti-Fascist sympathies and would like to assist the work of the Choir. I said no. With the best will in the world, and in no way to deprecate their idealism, students are not always reliable, are often transient, with, as it were, a mothership elsewhere, therefore lacking the stake that the true locals have; it would be better if Blonnie did not discuss the Choir with anyone at all and best to deny its existence were the matter to be raised. It shocked her to be told that any student in Rome could in fact be a Nazi agent. My insistence disappointed her, but she accepted the decision. At least for the moment. But more of that anon.

May and I would get to singing while we dug, chiefly Italian folk songs—we called them the "*stornelli*"—or some Ella Fitzgerald number he liked, or a Noël Coward. Just foolishness, you know. Pleasant foolishness. Or a sea shanty with a call and response, and Blon would tease us, then join in. She relaxed within herself a little, found her confidence. We made a not-too-bad trio, to my own ears at least. I remember her not long after St. Patrick's Day teaching us a humorous song her mother had learned from her own father back in Ireland, May taking the tenor line, I the bass, a lot of rambunctiousness and folderol about a fellow who's been a wild rover for many a year and spent all his money on whiskey and beer. Clearly an alcoholic wastrel in need of psychiatric hospitalisation. It wasn't my beloved Schubert, but then, if we're absolutely frank, would Schubert be the fellow for a hooley, is it called?

One has warm and agreeable memories of Blonnie, May and I digging, while, from inside the basilica, came the gloriously ethereal sound of the Sistine Chapel choir rehearsing in the mornings, before the heat of day arose. That music drifting out over the fields like cool, sweet air, do you know. Palestrina. Pergolesi. Allegri. Marenzio. The magnificence and solemnity and yet the vivacity. If that doesn't give one hope, one has an anvil for a soul.

Delia wrote to me, worried to hell, like any mother. Perhaps—if I may with affection push a little—like any mother hen. Indeed, I later had it on good authority that she applied to the Pope for permission to come back into the Vatican herself, but it was refused. She then asked us to smuggle her in, but the Monsignor said no. "It's getting like Leicester Square Tube station in here."

Somehow one evening, she got through to the apartment by telephone, don't know how. It was May who happened to answer. I heard him reassure her in finest London vernacular that Blon was quite safe. "Treacle, I'll take care of that kid like she was my own blood, never fear. Any sod looks at her sideways, I'll use him to feed my effing roses." And he added, which for some reason touched me, a few soothing words in Italian. In a different, gentler tone, as though he had unearthed in himself a slightly different man: "*Non preoccuparti.*"

One didn't mess about with May. Charming fellow. But tough. Not many chaps in Vatican City carry a razor up the sleeve. Matinee idol one minute, streetfighter in a snap. Famously, a London taxi can turn on a sixpence. So could May. He liked people thinking he was more unpredictable than he was. "Johnny May, he may not. That's my motto."

That was that. There we were. In the *orto*, building a greenhouse out of broken old stained-glass windows which we took from the ruined ecclesiastical storehouse where habitually we met for choir practice. That greenhouse was a pretty thing to see.

And all of this led to something more useful than you can imagine.

There came an afternoon when we were working as usual in the gardens. Blonnie beckoned us over to where she was hacking with a sickle, about fifty metres from Johnny and me. Her face and arms were scratched where she'd been overdoing it, as was her wont. She'd found a gap in the thorn hedge. "Take a see."

I was perspiring, a bit irritable, not in the mood for prankery but she persisted.

"You'll want to look at this, Uncle Frank, I promise."

May and I squeezed with her through the heavily overgrown briars, now finding ourselves in a narrow little gap where, it was evident, cats came in and out, then on a high rocky ledge from where the main road below could be seen. Gulls had made their homes in the rocks, and we tried not to disturb the nests with our noise. But what we witnessed down on the road was remarkable.

It was the main highway into Rome, the *autostrada* as it became known. The Jerries had closed it to the

citizenry. On both sides, high barriers had been erected and moats dug so that traffic could not be witnessed. But from this height, one saw what was happening. Jerry trucks by the dozen. Tanks from II and III battalion 29 Panzer Grenadier, the hardest fighting unit Jerry had in Italy. Armoured cars. Artillery pieces of every capability and description. Aircraft on transporter lorries. It was like having a secret ringside seat at the enemy's show. Breathless, silent as possible, we made sketches and notes—down to the serial numbers of individual Stukas, which could be seen on their wings.

Blonnie had brought us something invaluable.

That night over a rather miserable supper of nettle soup with chives, I told the Monsignor, Derry, and the Contessa of her discovery. At first, they found my report somewhat difficult to believe, Derry in particular; for the Boche almost never moved ordnance by day, fearing a strafing. But next morning they came with us to see for themselves. Blonnie led them through the thorns, to the gulls' cliff above the ravine.

Same drill as yesterday. Lines of tanks, trucks, troops, engineers. Trucks going north. Bulldozers. Low-loaders. Mortar sub-units. Ammunition lorries.

What I remember is Derry's long whistle of astonishment.

The traffic wasn't headed into Rome, but away from it.

Towards the north.

We knew what this meant. Hauptmann's current three-card trick was over.

German reinforcements were not coming.

Jerry was rehearsing an evacuation.

Which we never should have learned, were it not for Blon Kiernan.

One might think that the sight brought reason for happiness.

Yes and no.

In some of us, it stirred feelings of profoundest alarm. What you want is an orderly surrender with the laying down of weapons, not a tactical retreat, conducted in secret. A thug compelled to flee is a highly dangerous enemy. Bridges will be burnt. He is plotting much worse.

With a nihilist of Hauptmann's cunning, there are always new ways of shuffling the cards. And of course, he has acquired a way of shuffling your mind. One is tired, hungry, there is the overstimulation of what you have witnessed. In the small hours one can become obsessive, the Devil sends his questions. What exactly is being planned? For how long has the rehearsed retreat been occurring? When will it cease? Where is it headed? Even—one questions everything—was it staged for you to see?

I did not sleep at all well that night.

14

SUNDAY 19TH MARCH 1944
18.03 HOURS

Countess. Good evening."

"Dear Sam, I think you can address me by name at this stage."

"It isn't how I was raised. But thank you, Giovanna."

"Try Jo."

"That's a name for a jockey."

She laughs.

He sits at the windowsill in the shabby kitchenette of the apartment, drawing graphs of the German movements on endless reams of squared paper.

His back like a statue's.

Face reflected in the window.

Cigarette dangling from his mouth.

From time to time he goes into the little darkroom he has improvised from thick lengths of canvas—it reminds her of a Victorian daguerreotypist's booth—where he develops photographs for the forged identity cards and ration books supplied to escapees, but mostly he sits at the windowsill, scrawling pie charts and arrows like a crazed mathematician from a fable.

Every inch of wall space around him covered in chalk marks. Spirals, underlinings, over-scorings, crossings-out, the code names used by the Choir for certain Roman streets.

On a page he has inked the word "Transport"—she glimpsed it while getting a glass of greasy water at the sink—and other words and phrases she doesn't understand, although Osborne sometimes seems to, uttering clucks of approval or negation when Derry shows him a sheet of what appear to be dates and times, in stark, black Roman numerals.

The web of swirling scrawls seems a way of thinking for Derry. You'd imagine Osborne would object to the walls of his apartment being turned into a living notebook. He insists he doesn't. "Sam's hieroglyphs are too grand to contain themselves on a page," he says peacefully. "We must not molest a great artist at his work."

She doesn't ask—the Choir's rule is "Never ask, you'll be told if required"—but has picked up a little from Derry's conversation, cautious though he is to keep it vague. It has become clear to her that the Choir is receiving intelligence on the routes of German foot patrols through the city. She wonders from whom, and when it started. This is too detailed to be the fruit of watching the highway from Blonnie's Ridge, as the ledge near the *orto* has become known among the choristers.

The relief when all this wretched secrecy will be over.

It infects the cramped apartment like a smell that can't be sourced.

The walls oozing squiggles when she dreams.

On the table, the model of the city, built from tat found in drawers. An ashtray as the Colosseum, a snow-globe paperweight as St. Peter's. Chalk lines as the *viali*, Rome's main avenues. The Tiber is a magenta university scarf requisitioned from Blon; curling vertically down the surface of the table, crossed by bridges made of bottle tops. Churches marked by thumbtacks, German barricades by matchboxes.

More matchboxes appear by the day.

She refuses to think about who is living in her Palazzo. Hatred is a form of connectedness.

Young Blon is suffering. Trying to be strong. Often, she stands at the window, looking out at the Rome she has never quite loved. A place she was dragged to by her parents. Angelucci had a way of cheering her, was tuned to her, somehow. Face-pulls. Waggling his earlobes. Bits of nonsensical songs. Marianna used to tease her about him, which Blon seemed to like. Since he left, she's become secretive, introspective, pessimistic.

Money keeps arriving. In hatboxes and envelopes. In bags and old briefcases and hollowed-out books. Dirty wads of American hundreds, slim stacks of British twenties. Bricks of fraying, worthless lire that Johnny May says might as well be used as bog roll. On some days, jewellery, chalices, candlesticks. Menorahs have been

given, and Roman coins and golden daggers—but *money* is what's needed, the Monsignor is always saying.

"Tell them money, Jo, *currency*, American or sterling. Keep their trinkets and bloody gewgaws. We're not fences."

Often the money is delivered by one of the three astonishingly elderly nuns who seem to have acquired custodianship of the building—no one quite knows how—but they have taken a vow of silence and do not communicate in any other way.

There is a knock.

The Contessa opens.

A package is handed over.

Nothing is said.

The nun goes.

Osborne's joke is that he thinks of the three holy grandames as Columbus's ships: *Nina*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria*, but the soubriquets never quite catch on.

Pocketsful of dollars. Sometimes seven or eight thousand a day.

"Jo," Osborne says. "Would you be our cashier?"

"Perhaps Blon would care to help me? I should like that."

They count the cash into piles, fix them into lengths of ribbon they scissor from old clothes, then pass them to Marianna for checking. It is Marianna who fills and completes the ledger, in code, before hiding it behind a loose skirting board in an open-backed kitchenette cupboard.

The silence as they count, the concentration, the tired, sisterly smiles, the offers of cigarettes or collaborative scowls.

"Just call us the Banco Vaticano," Blon jokes.

"Loan me ten million," says Johnny May. "I'll buy us all a coffee."

Some nights, they have a hand or two of poker, pressing the banknotes into service as play currency. A stash of twenty thousand each is distributed by bow-tied May in croupier mode, pulling on the cuffs of his blue velvet tuxedo, passing out Screwdrivers and ashtrays. "Evening, *signore e signori*, welcome to Hughdini's Casino. Hell is empty, like Shakespeare said, and all the Devils are here. Credit ain't allowed. So don't ask."

Older streetcars in Rome have a shallow well in the roof where spare cabling and repair tools are stored. If the driver is sympathetic and the cargo surreptitiously removed, a thin escapee could be hidden in the hollow, moved around the city without being seen.

Everything is in not being seen.

Derry asks her advice—he's trying to work out a new means of moving through the city. He's excited about the notion, which came to him in a dream. It would take more time than going by streetcar or stealing through a tunnel, but he feels it could work. As a Roman, what does she reckon?

"More detail," she says.

"Say we wish to go from a certain block to a block nearby."

"Yes."

"So, instead of walking the street, which might take five or ten minutes, we take a route through a chain of sympathisers' apartments and back lots. Across quadrangles and yards, along rooftops if they're clear."

"Time-consuming."

"But we wouldn't be seen, Jo."

"It would require a lot of organisation."

"What wouldn't, though? Really, I think it worth exploring."

"That's not all he wants to explore," Blon says, on the rooftop, flicking a cigarette butt.

"Blon, please."

"It's plain as day he fancies you. And he's gorgeous, for God's sake. You'd want to ravish the face off the chap."

"I wouldn't."

"Wish it was me he was sweet on. I'd do illegal things to him, so I would. Every time he looks at me, I've to go to Confession."

"I'm leaving."

"So, at last he called you 'Jo'?"

“I fail to see any significance—”

“Let me help with the through-the-apartments idea. That’s too big of a task for two to take on, even if they’re lovebirds.”

“We’re not.”

“We can plan it out together, the three of us. I’ll get working on a map.”

“He’s got a name for the notion.”

“What is it?”

“‘Darkwalk.’”

“Oh, the dreamboat entirely. *Signor Darkwalk*, Sam Derry. Coming soon to a movie theatre near you.”

He’s at the window, looking out at the sky, its impossible blue. Over the forest of steeples, a high V of birds.

Turning to her. Surprised. Tiredness greying his face.

“Oh. Hullo, you. Didn’t hear you come in.”

“Away with your thoughts?”

“Something like that. A bit like it, at any rate. Would you like a cup of tea, Jo? I’ll stick on the kettle.”

She has a sudden picture of him as married, a father on a Sunday morning. Sleepy in a dressing robe. Joking with his children.

“Thank you. Sam. Yes.”

“Sugar?”

“Lemon.”

“Rather think we’re out of lemons, Jo.”

“Rather think we’re out of sugar, Sam.”

He is beautiful when he laughs. It’s not something you see often.

“I’ll take it black,” she tells him. “It’s Lent.”

Beyond the Vatican borderline, out in Rome, Escape Line agents are put on watch for neighbours willing to assist a darkwalk. The risk is not excessive. No one will ever know.

At dusk, unlock your doors and go into the kitchen. Someone will walk through your apartment. That is all. You saw nothing.

Every third day, as the bells start for seven in the morning, open the gate to your courtyard and look away. A minute later, when the chime stops, close the gate.

Vacate your flat for the night. Go to stay with a sick relative. Or stay home but don’t enter a given room that is accessible from the street.

You’ll hear presences but never see them. There is no one for you to betray.

Sympathisers with the Choir begin to call the nocturnal walkers “*Angeli di Mezzanotte*.”

Midnight Angels.

They’re like love, some say. They come, uninvited.

Mightn’t be wise for you to summon them, they’ll arrive all the same. Leave your door the slightest crack ajar. Don’t lock up. Just be brave.

Love is a fugitive. Love is a darkwalk.

Children unable to sleep come wakeful to parents’ beds.

You heard someone move through the house?

I’m not saying you didn’t.

It was only a Midnight Angel.

15

MONDAY 20TH MARCH 1944
05.49 HOURS

Something in nature has felt strange since Bruno awakened an hour before dawn from a dream of sneering fieldmice.

An unusual, sharp dustiness, like rotten citrus fruit disturbed.

The water in the streamlet where he goes to wash is running faster and rougher, eddying in counterclockwise spirals where usually it flows free.

Seagulls darting vertically from the weeds as though shocked.

Feral cats that had learned to approach him, now slinking from his hand.

Even the bells sound different.

What is happening?

Three hours pass without him seeing one bird in the sky.

Where is the old beggarman who haunts the street at this hour with his empty can held out to the passing women? Here every morning at nine, every evening around seven. The women call out to him in greeting, address him as "Bartimeo." But Bruno has never seen him receive a single coin and wonders how he eats or where he sleeps.

Ragged clothes. Bandaged eyes. The click of his white stick. Broken gumboots. His singing for the passers-by.

"Alle mura di Gaeta
si sentì suonare la banda"

There have been moments when Bruno considered climbing up to him, taking him by the arm. Saying, "Brother, share my shelter, let's share our songs by the fire," but he doesn't know how to say that or much else in Italian and wouldn't want to frighten an old man.

Instead, he prays for him every evening and listens to him singing. The words from across the street, descending into the Forum, and he rolls their odd and beautiful vowels around in his mouth, like the grapes of a new language. Like food.

"Viva l'Italia e viva l'Unità,
e quest'è Garibaldi, lasciatelo passà."

On the rare mornings when the old man fails to appear on the street, Bruno feels concern, hopes the poor fellow hasn't died in the night.

This is one of those mornings.

The bells bellow for ten o'clock but there is still no sign. The strangeness in nature continues.

A roiling, stinking mist moves across the depth of the Forum.

A murmuration of starlings heading out of the city's airspace.

An unholy sight that Bruno has never witnessed but has heard about from his grandfather, whose uncles were all sailors, as a presentiment of drowning: two sea hawks colliding in mid-air.

He hears the crash of falling masonry. Then the screams.

Sees the people rushing through the street. They think what's happening is an air raid, are running for the shelters. But Bruno knows the sound of bombers. What he's hearing is not that sound.

Turning, looking over his shoulder, at the dust-covered earth, he sees the cracks rip themselves open and pitilessly widen, hears the sickening wrench of the tree roots as the sinkhole wrenches itself into being, a living, sundering absence. Across the street, a house collapses, followed by the building containing the barber's shop where the Gestapo man goes, and the black dust ascends like a death-angel. How can it be

happening? Has bomb damage weakened the foundations? Crypts long beneath the cobbles are wrenched open, exposed. A thunderstorm of roof slates. A vomiting of chimneypots.

The old man appears on the street.

Lost.

Frightened.

Groping the air.

No stick.

People try to help him; he seems reluctant to leave, gesturing at the sky as though by gestures he could banish the vast dustcloud, and the people must run, for the bricks are still falling and now a newspaper office seems to stand on its tiptoes and grind a way forward before toppling with a livid roar, spouting window frames and sinks, spewing floorboards and typewriters, collapsing into itself, and the old man raises his arms as he kneels.

Not possible to abandon him.

A blind, old man.

That could be your father. Or you.

Yes, it could mean death, as Bruno hurtles across the Forum, past the tombs and shrines and toppled, broken statues, but you can't leave an old man to die all alone, you would never have a minute's peace, his ghost would torment you.

To the knotted rope, he climbs quickly to the ledge in the wall, up the ladder that leads to the street. The old man has his back to him as Bruno approaches through wreathing walls of dust, grabs him under the armpits, drags him towards the alley for which he has seen the people run. Both coughing, without words, behind them the walls crumple, but a hundred metres in front, Bruno sees the silhouettes of women beckoning, calling out. As he approaches, he discerns the grate of a cellar in front of a warehouse, one of those deep Roman cellars from the sweltering centuries before refrigeration, they're using it as a shelter, but the people are packed into it like cigarettes in a box, there is only one more space, he insists they take the blind old man who is screaming that he doesn't want to be down there even as they haul him into it.

There, a woman points toward the northern end of the street, gesturing that there is another cellar, exactly like this one, it's where Bruno should go.

"*Subito, subito, amore mio, vai veloce, subito!*"

She speaks another sentence or two, but Bruno doesn't hear.

His own gasp is the only thing he hears.

What he knows, as he turns, is that something has pierced his neck from behind. A blunt, sharp, long, short pain. It doesn't feel like a bullet. But that's what it must be.

Watery, the encroaching darkness as the street sounds fade.

Bodily lightness and savage thirst. Heavy head. Tingling spine.

Grandfather. Mother. Papa. Help me.

Giuseppina and her daughter are present. Seated at a loom. Coloured threads in their fingers. *Do not be afraid*, they are able to say, in some language he understands, whose words are made of light. *There is water. We have peace. No suffering is here.* The loom is somehow singing "*Caro Mio Ben*."

He feels his boots continue to walk as though they are alive. Tells himself *All I must do is stand in them, they will continue to carry me*. But he knows that the metallic liquid in his mouth is not a good thing to know, and that this will be the last thing he ever knows.

Hail Mary, full of grace, say Giuseppina and her child, whose name, like everything else, is fading.

16

THE CONTESSA GIOVANNA LANDINI
From an unpublished memoir written between 1963 and 1978

In Rome, during the Second War, I belonged to an illegal organisation we called "the Choir." Our purpose was to assist escaped Allied prisoners and other fugitives from the Nazis, who had invaded *la bella città* in September of 1943 but never, despite their cruelty, quite conquered it.

They declared it "an open city." In fact, it was not. We were governed by Nazi Fascism and brutalised by the Gestapo. By mid-March of 1944, we had thousands of fugitives in hiding and thousands more on their way.

In those weeks, I saw many a strange and haunting sight, but none stranger than the starlit life many of the escapees made for themselves among the Eternal City's rooftops.

To a Roman, spring is lovely, the soprano of the seasons. Our gracious parks, our glorious gardens shake awake and don their flirtish finery. Pink azaleas, scarlet poppies, yellow and gold mimosa. Sombre old pines take a dim view of the risqué new fashions, but their evergreen is the colour of envy. Old churches glimpsed through blossom. Sunlight through stained glass. Warmer, richer light gilding frescoes and fountains. Dawn rising earlier on a blushing Colosseum. Chianti-tinted apartment blocks and cream-hued cathedrals; dew-besotted groves steaming with the fragrance of rosemary. Winter wine tastes of velvet, spring's lusciousness is cheekier. Noses go deeper into the glass, in search of every note. As the colour of a plate may alter the taste of its food, a Caravaggio looked at in March has a riper, brighter, more hopeful, vivid sublimeness than the same one examined last November. Pictures beckon us into them, where in winter their beauty was chilly. The cold marble goddess seems sultry and alive as she smiles across the sculpture gallery at the inscrutably handsome Caesar. We find ourselves wanting to touch statues, mosaic work, sun-warmed ancient walls. The walkways by the Tiber become beautiful.

But men in cramped captivity saw little of the pageant. The air they breathed was not the sweetness of nature but the stale fug of shut-in places. To some Books, especially northern Europeans, our Lententide days felt sticky and oppressive, hotter than in fact they were. Water was scarce. Hauptmann, the Nazi Commander, ordered the mains turned off if an act of resistance by the populace displeased him.

As dusk fell, escapees would steal out from their stuffy cellars and attics and climb to a simulacrum of freedom. On the rooftops, they would walk and have company for an hour, aired by the relieving breeze.

When freedoms are forbidden, their enjoyment becomes an especially delicious pleasure. The men had been ordered by the Escape Line leadership never to leave their sanctums. But the harsher the terms of our order, the more the escapees defied it. Never with any disrespect or expression of mutinous purpose—quite the contrary, the escapees were almost always courteous—but there was something in being under the blue night, with their fellow riskers of death, that seemed impossible to resist.

"The angels ride Harleys," a Chicagoan escapee once told me. "The stars are their headlights coming."

In their disobedience, the escapees showed the stubbornness and ingenuity that had made them escapees in the first place. Survivors of unescapable prisoner-of-war camps, they had thrashed through barbed wire, swum moats, crossed raging rivers, had walked hundreds of kilometres, survived famishment and sunstroke. Each man was different, but every man was a jailbreaker. He would not be imprisoned by commands.

There were also the everyday facts of human nature. Internment in a camp had at least meant company. Freedom in hiding could be dull.

Many went walking, night-rambling through Rome, through the shadowlands of the occupied city. Stealing food. Mooching about. Picking up cigarette butts and girlfriends. Roaming the moonlit rooftops.

The gaps between buildings were spanned by any contrivable means. Ladders, chains, ropes, bits of webbing, gangways made of rusted girders, clotheslines connecting balconies. Flimsy bridges improvised from tied-together old planks. A sort of cable car fashioned from a tea crate and pulleys from the engine of a burnt-out Fiat, so that even the wounded could have "highlife" as the escapees termed it. "I'll see you upstairs," was their code. Or, sometimes, "In Los Angeles," nodding towards the literal meaning of that beautiful place name.

It had to be stopped.

I was given the task of stopping it.

Easier to gather water in a sieve.

Two among the worst offenders were called Weldrick and Moody. Many a time I cursed those names.

Billeted in a mechanic's repair shed, a former laundry whose high smokestack they used as a lookout, they refused to sit tight no matter our insistences. Indeed, our watchers had seen them walking in a nearby park—which contained German pillbox machine-gun batteries and was frequently shelled—filching beer from a lorry in Piazza Cavour, even attending a restaurant called Orco, on the east bank of the Tiber near the French seminary, where many escapees went, at huge danger to themselves and to others. The camel's back, frequently fractured, finally succumbed, when the straw reached us that Moody and Weldrick were organising a Friday-evening bottle party at an abandoned hotel they had noticed on their rambles, to which they planned to charge an entrance fee of "ten smokes."

As with any group of humans, gossip was a currency among the escapees. It was whispered that Moody, the previous winter, after shooting his way out of the prisoner-of-war camp, had left his six fellow runaways and roamed the Apennines alone with a satchel of dynamite, attacking German columns from on high and disappearing into the ravines. He had survived an avalanche in which another man, a shepherd, had died. He had married a peasant girl and had left her, or she had left Moody. One didn't know if any of this was true, but he did nothing to quell the rumours. "Moon" was his nickname. He was inscrutable.

Robert Weldrick, before the war a lawyer in his father and uncle's firm, was a less folkloric figure—unkind people might even say a somewhat unexciting one—but between them they had become what my Escape Line colleague, John May, used to characterise as a pair of bloody nuisances.

Only he didn't say "bloody."

And he didn't say "nuisances."

On the night of 20th March, my mission was to make my way to Weldrick and Moody at their hideout, after dusk, to issue them their final warning. One didn't like having to do it, yet we had to give an ultimatum. The rules must be kept. Comply or go.

But God had other plans. Something happened on the way.

A bombing raid began. It turned out like no other.

Mount Vesuvius had erupted the previous week, retching rocks the size of basketballs onto the people in its shadow, including the soldiers and airmen of the Allied forces at Anzio. Many aircraft had been destroyed. No one in Rome was expecting a raid so soon afterwards. In addition, the city was reeling from the shock and loss of life caused by a recent sinkhole near the Forum, and the air-raid siren system had been damaged. But here came the Americans that night, out of the roiling ash cloud to the south, attacking the railway station, the bridges, the highway. The Germans were firing back everything but their cap badges. The bombardment was ferocious, sticks of bombs fell like sleet, and, as the sky began to darken, it was lit by vermilion and scarlet flashes.

Soon I was running, which we in the Escape Line were ordered never to do, for it attracted unwelcome attention—but that choking, fiery night, one had to run. I knew where I was headed and decided to keep going, for the way back had been blocked by a collapsed street and I would need to think of alternatives.

Ahead, through clearing smoke, I saw the high chimney of Weldrick and Moody's one-time laundry, like an ocean liner's funnel in a dream. Standing on the very rim, like a circus acrobat or a diver about to jump, was one of the double act of troublemakers I had come to scold: Jack Moody.

I waved but he did not see me.

Then I heard a strange sound.

On the pavement, in a doorway, five metres from where I stood, face down was a fallen man.

On the ground, on his side, right arm extended like a toppled Statue of Liberty, a man in an ill-fitting grey suit.

Blood seeping from his mouth.

A length of rope as belt.

Left hand badly bandaged in a bundle of russet-stained rags.

Khaki undershirt torn to flitters.

As she approaches, she now sees that his neck, too, is dirtily bandaged, wrapped around, several times, in what looks like a shred of bedsheet.

His right foot is bare—its talon-like, dirty toenails. His ripped left boot has no laces.

"Get out of here, lady," Moody shouts down from the smokestack. "Jerry patrol three streets away. *Run.*"

Many, many times in the months after her husband's death, she thought—she knew—that she saw him. In the ruins of Caracalla. In a chapel. On Via Goffredo Mameli. Alighting from a tramcar on Piazza Del Risorgimento, hurrying into the fog. The sightings lasted a year; she understood them to be a mercy, a way of making the unmooring bearable. One night, awakened from a fierce dream of him, in slats of silvering moonlight she went to their bedroom window. He was smoking on the terrace below, talking softly to the peacocks, his back to her, and when she called to him, *Paolo*, she realised he was weeping. He rose from the marble bench and walked slowly into the cypresses, never once turning, strange moths flitting around him. She awoke in a hotel room in London.

Over time, it stopped. She would hear him in Verdi or taste him in the musky sweetness of almonds or sense him among the ancient palms in the Botanical Gardens. But seeing him stopped. Until this moment on Via Puccini. The terrible thought spears her now, *This is him.* He looks so like him.

She shakes away the notion.

What she wants to do is flee.

But she can't.

She kneels, checks the man's pulse. Faint. But he's alive. A smell of—what is it? mildew?—from his clothes. Then the reek of something else, she realises he has soiled himself. Sour, acrid stench, and the blood trickling from his lips. Broken teeth, bloodied stubble, and vomit gurgles from him now, as she hefts him onto his side, and she realises she is not able to leave him in these depths, but she must, for Moody and Weldrick and the mechanic on the garage roof are calling out to her that the Nazis are thirty seconds away, can be seen from the high chimney.

So she stands. Wipes her face.

Feels his hand *clench* her ankle.

"Help me," he whispers, in bad Italian. "I beg."

Too few words to place the accent. English? Russian? French?

On his wrist, a tattooed red crest with a white spread-winged eagle. In his fingers, a meagre bundle of banknotes.

He offers it. Pleads. "I have mother."

"Leave him," roars Moody, as she drags him half-upright. She knows Moody has reason on his side, she must abandon the man to die, as she gets her elbow under his armpit and staggers beneath his lumpen weight, across the street, towards the garage, from which Weldrick comes running to help, now into the forecourt, puke and blood staining her clothes, and the rage from Moody as Weldrick hauls the fallen stranger up the ladder to the loft.

Now, Germans on the forecourt. "What is going on here?"

"Nothing, sir," says the mechanic, wheeling the tool rack. "Just cleaning up, sir."

"People were seen entering these premises a moment ago."

"No, sir. I am alone. Look about if you wish."

"Explain what one of our men witnessed. He was imagining things, perhaps?"

"The old folk say the street is haunted, sir. It was built on an Etruscan cemetery."

"You look white in the face."

"Just tiredness, sir."

In the work pit, beneath the funeral hearse in for repair, she commands her lungs to stop breathing. Sees the high-polished boots as they stalk the oil-stained forecourt.

This is what it must be like to be in a grave, she tells her disobedient lungs and eyes. Every blink feels to her a cymbal clash, every pulse a struck gong. She listens to the Germans, the strange music of their Italian, the officer's voice steady and calm.

"Ever see escaped prisoners around here?"

"No, sir."

"Or Jews?"

"I only do my work, sir. As a poor man must."

"My boss can make you richer."

"How so, sir?"

"Via Tasso, Gestapo main headquarters. Ask for Commander Hauptmann."

"Thank you, sir. "

"In return for every prisoner delivered to him, he pays an extra day's ration card and twenty dollars. For every Jew, ten days' extra rations and a hundred and fifty dollars. You will bear it in mind."

"Yes, sir."

"You have children?"

"Four, sir."

"They are hungry since the rationing?"

"Sometimes."

"Permit me to give you a bar of chocolate for them. From my own ration. Here."

"I couldn't, sir."

"You will accept it. I insist. Do you wish to be impolite?"

"No, sir. Thank you, sir."

"The penalty for harbouring a fugitive is, of course, death. Then the executed person's family is taken into custody for questioning. Father, mother. Everyone. We are thorough."

"Understood, sir."

"Four children, did you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are an intelligent man. Let us shake hands on our understanding?"

"My hand is filthy with grease and oil, sir, but I understand you very well."

"I am glad you understand. Do the correct thing and think of your children. Goodnight. I shall tell the Commander that he can expect to see you soon. *Heil Hitler.*"

THE CONTESSA GIOVANNA LANDINI

From an unpublished memoir written between 1963 and 1978

I remember the airman well. Nor have I ever once entered a chapel without lighting a candle for him. In fact, I shall never forget him.

I should say he was five feet eight in height and weighed a hundred and seventy pounds. Lank brown hair, green eyes; on a knotted chain around his neck, a tiny locket contained a photograph of a girl at a fairground, on the same chain a religious medal of St. Michael the Archangel. On his right forearm were tattooed four capital letters: "DMRG."

Among the handful of words that I heard him mutter was "friend"—pronounced "fryend"—in an accent which to Moody seemed Russian. Moody had lived for a time among Russian immigrants in the Sheepshead Bay neighbourhood of New York City. But it was hard to identify the accent on such scant evidence and the letters on his forearm were not in the Russian alphabet. Soon, the man was unconscious.

I have a clear recollection of a nightmarish incident. Feral cats, of which Rome has an ever-expanding multitude, had colonised the old chimneys and shallows of that attic. I should say that it was lair to several dozen of the creatures but of course the number rose and fell owing to incest or cannibalism. Ignoring my presence and that of Weldrick, Moody, and the mechanic, eight or ten of the larger females approached from the murk, tails erect, and seemed to watch the new arrival with violence, or something like vengefulness, hissing weirdly, indeed spitting with such intensity that strings of saliva dripped from their fangs. It was the eeriest sound I had ever encountered. Refusing to be banished by the mechanic's shooing and Moody's curses, they remained, staring hard, their bony backs arched until at length they slunk away whence they had come like lady pharaohs. The mechanic looked frightened and made the sign of the cross.

It is said among the sisterhood of eccentric Roman widows who feed these outcast felines—I speak with affectionate respect of these ladies and have no doubt that I shall end my days among them—that the wildcats do not conceive of themselves as individual beings but of the whole pack as one multi-limbed, many-eyed creature, as bees and ants are thought to do. If that is so, this frizzling Hydra was sorely aggrieved by the interloper's presence. Opening his eyes momentarily, he looked terrified to see them but in an instant lost consciousness again.

As Weldrick put it, the young man was "beat up pretty bad." In addition to the gunshot or shrapnel wound, which was infected, to the ball of his left hand, he was bruised and lacerated, particularly about the face, chest and wrists, and had sustained some sort of serious injury, a penetrative wound, to the back of his neck, and was in a listlessly delirious state. We attempted to shake him out of it—literally shaking his shoulders—but had to go gently for his injuries were so severe, and Weldrick and I feared we would worsen them.

The mechanic and Moody fetched water from the old oil barrel stored for that purpose in the yard. We did our best to wash him. I was relieved there were no lice. After twenty minutes, his bloodshot eyes opened; he gazed on us in an unsurprised way, as though he knew exactly who we were, but then his head lolled backwards, and he plummeted into a sleep so profound that he could not be awakened.

He had no papers, dog-tags or identifying possessions on his person. The locket and medal I took from his throat, for safekeeping, so I told myself—but already I doubted he would ever be in a condition to receive them back from me. Perhaps there would be a family member to send them to, though this, too, seemed unlikely.

After a moment, I placed them back around his neck for I could think of nothing better to do with them.

I knelt and prayed the rosary, holding his hand.

Despite the order never to light candles, in the loft Moody has lit the stub of a votive light he took from the Church of St. Mary of the Dead one night while out on a ramble, and an old-fashioned, glass-domed oil lamp he found in a greenhouse at the Botanical Gardens. In a nook, there is a bottle of chloroform he stole from a dentist's windowsill in Prati, but he isn't sure drugging the kid would be wise.

The glow illuminates the sagging rafters, the gauzy drapes of spider-web, the time-blackened joists that hold up the cross-beam. A turret of concrete blocks that she realises must be a chimneybreast. The coven of retreating cats.

Above the hulk of the broken water tank is a jagged star-shaped hole in the roof, where Weldrick broke out the slates one midnight, seeking air.

Beyond the hole, the starlit heavens.

Wetting a rag, they clean the young man's bruised face and hands, with a masculine tenderness that moves her.

He is laid on a bed of their clothes and old sacks. As he trembles, Moody addresses him quietly, shushing the gurgling snore from his throat—"Shut up, kid, shut up"—now unwrapping the filthy swaddle of his bandaged neck.

"Poor bastard," Weldrick says. "He's done for. Got sepsis."

"Not yet," Moody replies.

"Rotten smell, Moon."

"Get the hootch."

"Moon—"

"Get it fast."

Like all escapees, they are forbidden to make or possess alcohol, on pain of eviction, but she knows they flout this rule, as prisoners do everywhere. She turns away as though about to witness an indiscretion.

Hearing the cork pulled, she looks up at the sparkling stars and the Zeppelins of looming cloud. Now back at Moody working steadily, as though he knows what he's doing, pinching away bundles of rotten, wet bandage, swabbing the wounds, his blasphemies coming quieter, as though an incantation of self-encouragement.

"Come on, Moon," he says to himself. "Do it right."

Flies flit at his sweat-dripping face.

Weldrick glances up at her through his twine-repaired horn-rims. Impassiveness in his expression but a strange light behind it. She knows that look, has seen it ten thousand times since war came. Swallowed-down, promise-proof dread. From boys of nineteen, from men already grandfathers. Once or twice, from mirrors.

"*Grazie*," she says.

"For what?"

"For helping."

"I didn't get time to think about it."

"Yeah, you didn't," Moody says.

"We had no choice," she tells him.

"My ass, you had no choice."

"Leave her alone, Moon, for Christ's sake, what's done is done, keep working."

"Will he die?" she asks.

"Ten to one," says Moody. "Us too. Thanks a whole bunch, lady. Next time I need a bullet in my head, I'll call you."

"His breathing's faint," Weldrick says.

"Pump his chest."

"I am."

"Pump it harder, you fukkin jellybaby. What are you, playing harpsichord over there?"

Kneeling, she joins Weldrick, kneading, steady-pumping.

"Come on, Superman," says Moody. "We got you."

She feels the chest cavity fill as the lungs inflate and try to take over, the dull putter of the pulse in his wrist.

"Harder," Moody seethes, slapping the face tartly, once, twice, pinching the cheek.

"Do *not* die on me, you son of a bitch. You hear when I'm talking? Die, and I'll damn well kill you."

Now the mechanic is here, flashlight in hand.

"What happen?"

"Fukkin barn dance," Moody says. "What's it look like, Giuseppe?"

"Get him out of here," the mechanic says. "This dangerous. He make noise."

"How in hell we get him out?" replies Moody, in Staten Island Italian.

"I want gone. You understand? By tomorrow morning, latest."

"Keep telling me what you want, Wop, I give a shit what you want."

"He go."

Moody darts so quickly that it takes a moment to realise the object he's wielding is a switchblade. Backing the mechanic up hard against the chimneystack.

"Want to talk, huh, Giuseppe? Let's talk. What you say?"

"*Vaffanculo*."

"Bother me again and I'll slit your tongue seven ways, *capiche, amico*? You miserable piece of slimeball jadrool Eyetie shit."

"You talk to a Roman like that? I cut you to pieces."

"The big, noble Roman, go blow it out your ass, Mac. Mark fukkin Antony with buck teeth and a slickback. More grease in your hair than you slop on an axle. We're only here because you get paid and you damn well know it."

"Moon," says Weldrick, "there's a lady present."

"Big swing."

"*Enough*," she insists. "Stop raising your voices. We need to think."

"Hand to Christ," says Moody. "Lady *Bountiful* here gonna tell us all what to do. *You're the one brung him up here*. Not me, doll."

"She's right, Moon," Weldrick says. "Shut your mouth. Calm down."

"Says College Boy Almighty. Go blow the dandruff off your glasses."

"There've been times, Moon," Weldrick says, "I had to leave men to die. I won't do it again. Get that straight. Jesus Christ Almighty tells me leave a man to die alone, I'm ignoring what I'm told. And I'm on the limb for that man. Until hell freezes over. Wrong? Right. *I don't give two fucks.* You get me?"

"When you're done bleeding your heart out," Moody says, "could I point out he's breathing normally?"

She watches as he opens his eyes, but after a moment closes them again with a wordless, guttural shudder.

"Join the army," says Moody. "See the world. Meet the girls."

Light moves across the attic like a rumour.

17

TUESDAY 21ST MARCH 1944
06.13 HOURS

It pleases him that the nameplate on his apartment door sounds mellifluous in Italian.

AMBASCIATORE DEL REGNO UNITO
DI GRAN BRETAGNA E IRLANDA DEL NORD

Who wouldn't want to be that?

Sir Francis D'Arcy Osborne's knowledge of the language has been improving since he went into hiding in the Vatican.

Somehow there is more time here; days have a strange stretchability, in the mothership of an institution that thinks in millennia. "When God made time, He made a lot of it," the Pope remarked to him at the credential presenting ceremony two years ago. "Most of it we store in St. Peter's." And the Italians are not like the snooty French; they like you to try. Deploying Italian, even imperfectly, floats out an impression of fellow feeling that can be useful at very difficult moments.

This might be one of those.

"*Mia carissima Giovanna*," he says, "*per favore dimmi che stai scherzando.*"

My dearest Giovanna. Please tell me you are joking.

Not long after six o'clock in the morning and he is sipping a chipped glass of spumante. On the ottoman before him, a spread deck of Neapolitan playing cards and an opened florilegium from the Vatican Library. On the wall, a portrait of King George.

Beyond the leaded window, a dawn the same colours as the Ambassador's fuchsia and turquoise silk dressing robe. Further, in the distance, blue Apennines. His breakfast—a lump of stale focaccia—has been placed on a Regency silver dish, beside a pot of Earl Grey, a bedraggled volume of Dante and an Italian-English dictionary borrowed many months ago, according to its yellowed frontispiece, from Paddington Library, London W2. The velvet tasselled smoking hat and Eton cord slippers are from New & Lingwood, Jermyn Street, W1. The folded newspaper, a copy of *The Times*, is now five months old. He goes through it every morning, front masthead to back-page obituaries, explaining to questioners that it improves with age.

"I'm afraid I am entirely serious, Frank," she tells him.

He removes his pince-nez. "But we know nothing of this individual. With great respect and affection. You tell me has no papers, nothing whatever to identify him. It's a little troubling, *un po' sconcertante*, as a woman of your wisdom and insight can see, my dear. You're quite certain?"

"The men searched as much of his person as they could."

"As they could?"

"He was—is—heavily bandaged."

"But surely you'll have gleaned at least something?"

"Civilian clothes. Yes, I know, those could be a disguise. Catholic medal around his neck. From the accent, we can tell he's not Italian. Nor a speaker of English. We don't think he's German. Possibly Eastern European but could be Russian."

"Dear Jo, this is more than a little irregular. It is against policy, as you know."

"I am well aware—"

He continues, gentle of timbre, but riding over her all the same. "One can't have them waltzing in willy-nilly. We're not a dosshouse, after all. London have insisted and one must concede they're not wrong. We must know the identity and, as it were, the provenance of every escapee we assist. Otherwise, there are security considerations, as will be perfectly obvious. Spies, lies, every sort of deception. The dashing Major Derry would have us all shot if he knew."

"Yes, I would," says Derry, entering the room without knocking. "What's this bloody outrageous nonsense I

hear?"

"Sam," Osborne says, "it's a little early in the morning for vehemence. Sit down, my dear fellow. Have a sherry?"

"Thank you, no."

"Gin Sling more the ticket?"

"I said no."

"*Va bene*. Glad you're here, Sam. Little matter's come up."

"Why wasn't I told?"

"One was intending to send for you momentarily but pre-breakfast one's inhuman, don't you find? And I haven't yet abluted. As you'll observe."

He strokes his chin, scowling, the early-morning shadow.

Derry's granitic stare.

She pours tea.

"Sam, the fact is that the Contessa has been telling me how she found herself on the horns of a dilemma while out on a mission overnight, *è vero,* Giovanna? Fellow badly wounded in the street, she felt she had to pop him into a safehouse. Spur-of-the-moment decision. She felt there wasn't an option. Unfortunate, nettlesome occurrence. Could have happened to any of us."

"Not to me."

"Of course, not to you, Sam. One spoke without thinking."

"Try thinking without speaking, Frank. You'd like it."

"We would every one of us be quite lost without your—what is the word?"

The word Derry utters is not the word for which Osborne was reaching.

"Your leadership and courage, Sam, is what I meant. Your elan."

"You can cut the professional flannel, Frank, it doesn't work on non-idiots. The Contessa oughtn't to think she runs the bloody world. Nor does she run this organisation."

"I should prefer you to address me by name, Sam," she says.

"I should prefer to address you by whatever I prefer to address you by."

"Come, Sam," says the Ambassador. "We're friends here. Mind our tone."

"I want the Monsignor informed of this dog's mess."

"Sam, I agreed we'd let him alone for a bit during Lent. As you know he's exhausted. May I suggest to your better nature that this little complexity is something we can resolve between ourselves."

Index finger trembling, Derry points to the window. "I have seven thousand escapees out there who know the meaning of exhaustion. Hiding. Hungry. Desperate. Frightened. A single one of them gets recaptured and done over by Jerry, could lead to a hundred dead or deported to a camp in Krautland. This isn't fucking Gilbert and Sullivan. It's war. Don't you see? This man could be a sleeper agent or any kind of Axis spook."

"Sam, he is sick and friendless and alone—"

"If that is all he is, it is already more than enough. We don't know what's up with him. We haven't any medicine. A sick man may be incapable of keeping quiet during searches. Compromise the collective effort and you become expendable. There it is."

"Translation," she says. "I should have left him to die."

"Yes, you bloody *should* if it comes to it."

"Then you'd leave *me* to die, Sam. And Frank? If you had to?"

"Spare me your Italian grand-opera rubbish, Jo, the audience isn't interested."

"*Would* you?"

A long moment as she looks at him. His face bright with anger.

He strides from the room, slamming the door as he goes, so hard that some object made of glass reverberates on the bookshelf, and a rook clatters noisily from the windowsill. The cigarette she didn't notice him light is smouldering in the tarnished brass ashtray.

"*Madonna mia*," Osborne sighs.

"Frank, what have I done?"

The Monsignor walks slowly from the upstairs chapel where he has been saying his private daily Mass, unfolds the stole from around his shoulders, places it carefully in the old mahogany garderobe, his movements ponderous, over-deliberate, as always when he is angry. His face is the colour of altar wine.

Moving is how he thinks. She knows this about him. Stillness would mean he is at peace. But he is never truly at peace, is always weighing and sifting. Drawing patterns in the sands of his mind.

She watches as he genuflects before the tabernacle and makes the sign of the cross, head bowed, eyes closed, lips moving. An unhurried, old-fashioned genuflection, knee touching the floor. If you speak to him before he is ready, he freezes you or turns away. He has a way of transmitting messages without saying them.

He's lost weight these past months. She knows he's not sleeping, doesn't eat—not even when there is food, which on many days there is not. Hauptmann has offered a bounty on him; Gestapo touts could be anywhere. Even to appear at a window could mean death by sniper. Pallid, puff-eyed, watchful, uncombed, he has started to acquire the aura of a man who lives in shadow.

Through the long, arched corridor, she follows at a distance. He doesn't like you to walk too close.

Water drips from the ceiling. Daylight from narrow slits.

On the walls, thousands of scratched names, some there for half a millennium. Students, pilgrims, seminarians, seekers—people say Keats's name is among them, alongside a tiny carving of a nightingale, but she has never been able to find it and doesn't have time to keep looking. No one outside the Escape Line knows the truer secret of this corridor, that hundreds of the markings have been put there since September: the names of escapees, with their ranks, regiments and countries, and the names of the Roman Jews who have fled into hiding. These all must be written down somewhere, he insists. If something isn't written, it hasn't happened.

He walks to the gable wall, with a nail file carves another name in the plaster.

Now he turns.

Beckons.

She goes to him.

He embraces her by the elbows.

Blesses her.

"You look troubled, Jo."

"Yes."

"I am, too."

"Why is that?"

"Lent troubles me, always," he says. "I suppose it's why we have it. To go on Rendimento."

"Rendimento?"

"I'm lately on a mission into a shadowy old dungeon—my head—to rescue a beaten-down prisoner—my soul."

"I wish you luck."

He laughs. "I'll need the same. So my confessor told me this morning. Tough character. Scottish Redemptorist. Went hard on me. As no doubt I deserved."

"You can't have many sins."

A curt woof of laughter. "You'd be amazed. Will you walk with me?"

"Yes."

"During my doctorate I studied a thirteenth-century book of hours—here, you know, above in the Vatican Library—that speaks of the body as a ship. With the soul as her cargo. An image would get you thinking. I wasn't long a priest. You'd still be thinking. Like a honeymoon."

"I don't remember thinking on my honeymoon."

"You probably did."

She looks at him.

"I turned that page," he says. "And came to a beautiful illumination would still you in your tracks: silver and blue and the golden tips of the waves. Cherubim in the sky and they blowing the sails. Dolphins peeping up. An octopus in a crown. The under-deck carrying the soul done in gold leaf and indigo. It's how I once felt. Like gold leaf and indigo."

"You don't now?"

"These days, my ship is a slaughterhouse where I wrestle with hatred. For our enemies."

"Isn't that natural?"

"Doesn't forgive it."

"Perhaps not. We can't know."

"Apparently a better fellow than either of us said, 'Love your enemy. Do good to those that hate you.' There weren't brackets or commas. Wish there were."

"He said many hard things, Hugh."

"That doesn't make disobeying them easy."

"You told me once, with prayer, the impossible becomes."

"Becomes what?"

"Just becomes. As night becomes dawn."

“My confessor told me, ‘Pray for Hauptmann. As your penance. And for his family.’ I said his family I could manage. Even his conscripts. Not him. The prayers I’d have for that bastard would turn heaven’s air blue.”

“These are heavy things to carry. You might put them down an hour. May I tell you why I am here?”

“Oh, I know why you’re here, Jo. Bad horses ride fast.”

“Is it really so bad?”

“What’s happened has severely endangered us, Jo. I know you can see it.”

“I felt I hadn’t a choice.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“What to do?”

“If he saw the other men in the loft or heard their names, he can’t be moved. We’re stuck with him. For now. Do nothing yourself, I’ll arrange for the loft to be visited and the men told to stay put.”

“By whom?”

“Better you don’t know. Was there anything else?”

“If I could undo it—”

“You wouldn’t undo it. You’re stubborn. That’s why two of us love you.”

It’s a line he sometimes uses when anxiety takes her.

“A loyal pair,” he says. “God and me.”

“But what is to be done?”

He gives a tight laugh. “You’ve done enough.”

There are times when the stranger stirs, raises wrists to his eyes as though about to weep. But as soon as Weldrick or Moody make to move from their sullen card game or private thoughts to go to him, he sinks back into whatever darkness he is fighting, or desiring, and his breath steadies down to a wheeze.

When distressed, when he flails, they press the chloroform rag to his hot face, holding him gently by the forearms and shins until the juddering ceases. The cats stir and mewl in the crawlspace.

Moody hears what he knows to be a Fieseler Storch—a “Stork”—a German surveillance aircraft, over Parioli. A terrifying machine, able to take off in a distance less than twice its own wingspan and to land on a city street. It flies low, snail-slow, cameras strapped to its undercarriage. Romans say Hauptmann is learning to fly one.

Weldrick mops the stranger’s forehead, drips droplets of sugared water or melted chocolate and maize pellets and breadcrumbs between his lips, tries as best he can to keep him clean. Moody takes his pulse and begins referring to him as “Cheekbones.”

People got to be called something, he says.

By daylight, the work-shed below them is busy, alive with clanks and blasphemies. Revs, roars, rants, reunions, an illegal radio blasting Puccini and Sinatra. The mechanic—like all bad tenors, he sings too often—alters the lyrics to obscenities about customers’ mothers and wives, chuckling at his own stupidities as he air-kisses his reflection in the windows of the rattly old hearses whose repair he seems to specialise in.

The singing at least provides something to talk under.

“Cheekbones stir?”

“Not for hours, Moon.”

“He ain’t much of a conversationalist.”

“You more than make up for him.”

“I’m starving.”

“You told me already.”

“You ain’t never been hungry? They eat air where you’re from?”

“You’re always hungry, Moon. It’s unnatural.”

“How about we kill Cheekbones and eat him?”

“Don’t think he’d be tasty.”

“Little hot sauce and mayo.”

“Moon, you’re going to hell.”

“Cheekbones on rye, with a side order of small-town lawyer.”

“Shh. The singing’s stopped.”

“Praise the Lord.”

As night falls, they talk more freely. No one is below. The stranger stirs and moans; they’re like parents at his cradle. Moody never stops talking, sardonic mutters, smart remarks. His term of address for Weldrick has stopped being irksome but is hard to ignore. He won’t let you sleep when you need to.

"How you doing over there, judge?"
"Moon, I told you I'm not a judge. Just a lawyer."
"Like to be a judge one day?"
"Not much."
"You don't care for lawyering?"
"It's all right."
"Dough okay?
"Sure."
"Just ain't your bucket of beer, huh?"
"Something like that."
"Why'd you do it?"
"My dad founded the firm. With his brother—he's dead now. It was always assumed I'd join. So I joined."
"Ever defend a murderer?"
"No."
"Arsonist?"
"Not yet."
"Bigamist?"
"Nope."
"How comes?"
"We don't handle much marital. It's mainly real estate and probate."
"Why's that?"
"People don't get divorced much in Evanston, I guess."
"What they do, sell houses and die?"
Yellow light in the sky and a distant, brief boom. Flashes of scarlet ack-ack from the hills to the south. The wounded man shivers in drifts of sleep. Moody takes a long swig of stolen bourbon.
"Tell me more about Crudsville? What they call it, Evanston?"
"I'll tell you tomorrow, Moon."
"Could be dead tomorrow, judge. Tell me now."
"It's a pretty little town. Not too far from Chicago. Grow up in a place, it gets into your blood."
"Say, maybe, I dunno, I'll come out there and visit. When this bullshit is all over. What you say?"
"You'd be welcome."
"Yeah?"
"Sure."
"You got a sister?"
"If I did, Moon, I'd tell you I didn't."
"We'll—y'know—trade addresses. When this bullshit is all over."
"I'd like that."
"Ever been to New York City, judge?"
"No."
"Like to go?"
"Sure."
"Look me up. We'll go dancing."
"I'm not much of a dancer."
"I wasn't asking you on a date, judge. I meant with some dames. Say, maybe we'll invite Cheekbones. If he ain't in a box."
"Sure."
"You think he's gonna die, judge?"
"Moon—I need to sleep."
"Ever go out in Chicago?"
"Two, three times a year."
"Ever been in one of them blues clubs they got going in Chicago?"
"No."
"Them's some clubs I'd like to see. Oh, baby. I heard tales. Cats in zoots blowing horns. The drummer going nuts. Chicks shaking what the good Lord gave them."
"You paint a picture."
"What you gonna do, judge, when the bullshit is over?"
"Sleep."
"C'mon."

"Go back to school, maybe. Study architecture."

"They got Fancy Dan buildings over there in Chicago, I heard."

"Sure do."

"Run by the Micks, though."

"Chi-Town?"

"The Micks can't run Mickland but they're running Chicago, go figure. Course you see 'em in New York, all the Micks and the Krauts. Greeks. Rooskies. Swedes. Armos. Bohunks. Chinese. Goombahs. We got everything. I got Mick in me myself down the mother-line, so I'm told. In the Apple, you wouldn't know. Could be *French*, wouldn't know it."

"I think you'd know if you were French, Moon."

"How'd I know?"

"You'd be sophisticated, charming and attractive to women."

"Guess I ain't French."

"You have your moments."

"You're Frencher than me, judge."

"Moon, I need to sleep."

"Who's stopping you? *Au revoir*."

"*Merci bien*."

"Me, you, and Cheekbones, on the tiles in Chicago. Say, you gimme a job if I come out there to Crudsville and visit? Your gumshoe, you know. Or your partner. Why not? Weldrick and Moody. We sound like a law firm."

"Sounding like one is half the battle."

"Damn straight."

At four in the morning, they are playing poker for smokes when a strange voice is heard in the attic.

"Faildrink," it whispers.

In a moment they're at his makeshift bedside.

The stranger's eyes are open.

"Faildrink," he says again, taking Weldrick by the wrist.

"Is he saying he wants a drink, Moon?"

"The fuck I know what he's saying, I look like, what, the League of fukkin Nations to you? Give him a cup of water. Kid, you want *water*? Here. Water."

He tries to elbow upwards, but pain collapses him again, Weldrick easing him down, the airman wincing and coughing.

"You, Faildrink," he says. "Keep my life."

"I don't understand."

"Judge," says Moody quietly. "The kid's saying your name."

"You Faildrink. You fryend me. I, Polska. I, Bruno."

"You're okay," says Weldrick, "take it easy. You're safe."

"And Moon. You fryend me."

"Bet your ass, kid. I fryend you. Who the hell wouldn't. Relax."

The airman points a shaking finger towards to the deck of cards on the upturned box and grimaces as they are brought to him by Moon.

"What, these? Wanna play a little poker, fella? Welcome to Vegas."

The kid shuffles through them painfully, picks out three kings, lays them on the grimy coat doing duty as his bedsheet, points to them in turn.

"Faildrink, Moon, Bruno," he says. "You fryend me,"

"That's right, kid. On the money. Now, sleep. Take it easy."

Weldrick never imagined he would see Jack Moody in tears. He never does again. They don't speak of it.

Twice, the Germans come back to the auto shop, their talk rising up through the attic floorboards. That's when you don't even blink.

Weldrick fishes out the sharpened chisel he's hidden in the joists.

Switchblade in hand, Moody waits.

The goons don't speak Italian, the mechanic pretends not to know any German. There is laughter and backslappery, as though a bargain is being agreed, like men selling a carthorse, or buying one.

Bottles are chinked. There are cries of "*Prost* " and "*Salute*."

An hour after the Germans leave comes the rap on the trapdoor. The six-knock signal that is the Escape Line password. Weldrick says the rhythm is a double dactyl. You get it in poetry.

"Rashers and sausages," tapped out.

A man they don't know climbs silently into the attic. The monk's robe he has on is too large for him and at odds with the stolen Wehrmacht boots. In one hand, a battery torch, in the other a camera; in his underarm holster a machine pistol. The loaf he hands over is stale as a rock, but they seize upon it, grasping, elbowing one another out of the way.

"Slowly," he whispers. "You don't want the shits. Derry's the name. British army."

Now approaching the stranger, Derry leans over him like a vampire about to administer an induction bite. Long shadows move in the attic, measuring the minutes. Cats in the crawlspace. The glint of his torch. Quick *snicks* as his camera clicks.

"One thing I am relieved to be able to tell you, gentlemen," he says without turning.

"What's that?"

"Our guest is a Pole."

"Yeah, we thought he said Poland. How d'you know?"

"Eagle tattoo he's got, that's off the Polish flag. Flyboy, I'd reckon, from the Archangel Michael medal. Patron saint of airborne warriors. Could be 303 Squadron but likelier the 318s. If you look at the other tattoo."

"DMRG?"

"*Dywizjon Myśliwsko-Rozpoznawczy Gdański*. City of Gdańsk Fighter-Reconnaisance Squadron 318 to me and you. Good boys to get drunk with. Rarely speak English. So you don't waste time on conversation."

"You got Polacks flying Spitfires?" Moody scoffs. "They can barely chew gum."

"Ever fly one yourself, genius?

"Ain't the point."

"Ever fly anything but your ugly mouth off? Yank habit, I know."

"Yank habit is kicking out Englishmen. Ever hear of the revolution?"

"Jefferson would be proud of you. Try brushing your teeth."

"Unpeel your undies there, slick. No need to get nasty."

"Glad to hear it."

"Comedian, huh? I'm laughing my brains out over here."

"I wouldn't do that, sport. You'll need the few you've got. Does he speak?"

"Not much."

"Never?

"Heard him only once or twice."

Derry nods, mumbling to himself, as Moody comes closer.

"So Y'Majesty, what's a Polack flyboy doing in Rome?"

"Polish Air Force was stationed in France for a bit and when Jerry pitched up, a lot of them came to England, Scotland, joined the RAF, or under its wing at any rate. Own units. Polish-speaking. Gave Jerry a serious kicking at the Battle of Britain. Down at Anzio now. You'll hear them above us any night. Here's a hundred and fifty dollars. More will be brought to you soon. If you've a way of getting food, get it, we can't guarantee a daily ration. Never leave your billet. Keep quiet."

"Get food but don't leave this shitpit? How in hell we do that, Limey?"

"Private Moody, I believe?"

"My friends call me Moon."

"So, Moody's what I'll call you. Don't slouch like a slut when I'm talking. My rank is Major, Royal Artillery, I am your commanding officer now. You salute when I speak. You shut it when I tell you. Arrangement doesn't work for you? Hit the road and good luck. I've a waitlist for billets. Understood?"

"Sure, Big Shot."

"Try again, didn't hear you."

"Yes, sir."

By unspoken treaty, the sarcasm Moody gets into his assent is ignored. "Good man," Derry says. "Let's not get off on the wrong foot. Confine reconnaissance to the hours between dusk and first light. Quiet places. Behind cafés. The bins are worth a scrounge. If you're caught? Name, rank, and number, nothing more."

"What do we do with the Polack?"

"Whistle Chopin."

"Huh?"

“I don’t give a fish’s tit what you do. Don’t get caught.”

18

WEDNESDAY 22ND MARCH 1944
15.01 HOURS

From across the Vatican gardens, he sees her at the iron table outside the curvilinear glasshouse. Dressed in black, she is reading a fashion magazine, smoking. She pushes a strand of hair behind her ear, lights a cigarette on the one already lit. As though sensing his presence, she glances up, but doesn't wave.

He sets out hurriedly towards her through a cluster of uprising pigeons but, approaching the ornamental bridge, is halted by a Swiss Guard halberdier who holds up a gloved hand.

"Monsignor, this area of the gardens is closed."

"Why?"

"We are deepening the bomb shelter. Information has been received that an air strike will be launched on the Vatican."

"Is the Holy Father to be evacuated?"

"Men of my own rank are not permitted to know such matters. Turn back. You are not allowed to cross that bridge."

In the distance, she has risen from the table and is approaching. Black pillbox hat, pearled mantilla, grey overcoat open. Stylish black oxfords negotiating the stubby, glassy cobbles, umbrella under her arm like a swagger stick. Expensive clothes become her.

Stay where you are, he thinks. The Guardsman is watching.

But she continues.

To be still? Or back away? Pretend not to know her? Suddenly it's too late, she's only metres from him, nodding.

"Contessa," says the Guardsman, wearily. "With sincere respect. You should not be in this place. Please leave."

Shaking her head without looking at the Guardsman, she lights a fresh cigarette, exhales a ring of smoke that wreaths itself around her, the same colour as her scarf and eyes. The breeze raises an ivy leaf against the collar of her polo coat.

"*Buongiorno, Monsignore*," she says, in a formal tone, for the Guardsman's benefit. "You won't remember me but we met once, at the golf links with my late husband, the Count. It was some years ago, at Viterbo."

"Good day, Contessa Landini. I had of course heard that you were on Lenten retreat in the Vatican, but my work has kept me from finding you."

"An intervention of the Holy Ghost to run into you so unexpectedly, *Monsignore*. How have you been keeping?"

"Quite well, *grazie*. How is your handicap?"

"Down to eleven."

"Impressive. My own, unfortunately, goes in circles."

"I should like you to hear my Confession, if you would? Perhaps this dutiful young protector will give us five minutes of privacy. If I ask nicely."

A century passes. The Guardsman trudges away.

"Derry visited them," the Monsignor says.

"And?"

"Tells me he's Polish. We've checked it. Sam's RAF contact confirmed they've a Pole missing, downed over Rome. The man is pretty sick. And we don't have a doctor on the books since the last one was shot."

"A nurse at least?"

"We've people hunting."

"Then I shall have to return to the safehouse myself."

"Out of the question, Jo."

"God knows my Red Cross training was basic but it is better than nothing. I can clean his wounds at least

and bring a couple of bottles of antiseptic. And there is a hidden way of getting to that neighbourhood."

"What is it?

"I think you know."

"Far too dangerous."

"You look ill, Hugh."

"Touch of fever."

"Get better."

Lightning crackles over the basilica. Gardeners retreat beneath awnings outside the long greenhouses.

"Where are you going now, Jo?"

"To consult the Tabula."

"For the love of Our Blessèd Lady, I appeal to your reason. Drop this absurd idea and don't return to that loft."

On the floor of the Ambassador's apartment are twenty vast books. She pictures them as she hurries through the spattering rain. The ninth volume is the one she will need.

Four months ago, following air-raid damage on a sixteenth-century palace near the Janiculum, a vast piece of fraying sailcloth was rolled with fearful care into a scroll the width of an oak trunk.

Tied with silken ropes, placed on the back of the largest military vehicle in Rome, a flatbed that had been used by the corps of engineers for transporting Nissen huts in Abyssinia, it was driven at glacial pace, under armed guard, to St. Peter's Square, where a crowd had gathered to watch what would happen to the *Tabula Geographica Romae*.

The Professor of antique cartography was waiting. Two newspapermen from a pool were permitted to observe. It was said that their names had been drawn by lot. In fact, a bribe had coaxed fate.

Between the fountains, which had been turned down to the tiniest trickle, in case their breeze-borne spray might spatter the priceless cargo, the object was unloaded and carried into the basilica like the coffin of a fallen giant. Through the high, gilded doors, down the broad, gracious nave, past the eyes of marble martyrs, the wounds of a hundred Christs, the supplicating hands of the sorrowing Virgins, over the worndown, prayer-strewn tombstones of Popes, around the bleak, blocky mountain of the high alabaster altar, the Professor gesturing and hissing all the way, calling the Guardsmen *idioti* and the gathered monks lazy, through the lightning storm of officialdom's flashbulbs.

Behind the altar, over the course of two anxious nights and three days, the Tabula was unspooled, inch by inch, by the Professor and seven of his muslin-gloved postgraduates. They hung the sailcloth from the scaffolding it had taken a dozen master carpenters working flat out a fortnight to build, a magnum opus in itself, like a mastodon's skeleton of maple and hand-carved pine, but nothing to the marvel it was purposed to display.

The largest map of Rome ever made.

Never had it been exhibited completely unrolled. There wasn't a hall in the city, nor anywhere in Europe, large enough to stage such a revelation. New York was rumoured to offer the yawning chasm that was the Rose Room at the Public Library in Manhattan, the shelves of which held sixty thousand books on open display, but the map was too fragile and precious to be subjected to an Atlantic crossing during wartime and anyhow the Americans would not accept an exhibition from a state occupied by Nazism.

Superlatives competed in the Roman and Milanese newspapers. Those writers who had not seen the map, and never would, penned the most vivid descriptions. The map was the size of an Olympic tennis court. It was larger than the Piazza della Madonna dei Monti. In a city of wonders, it was celestially astonishing, the Sistine Chapel ceiling of maps.

Exaggeration and a desire to outdo, the twin staple of newspapers, set in. The map had the dimensions of a soccer pitch, was taller than the Spanish Steps, had stitched into it, near the top right-hand corner, the swaddling clothes in which the infant Jesus was lullabied. The map's fineness of detail was unprecedented, inimitable. If you examined a single square foot under a magnifying glass, splendours swam before your straining eye—dragons, sea monsters, archangels, seraphim, a skeleton that appeared to revolve as you looked at it.

No one could say how, or definitively why, the map was made; one theory was that it was somehow related to the building of the Tiber's defences after the devastating floodwaters of 1598. More than three centuries later, it was still foxing the experts. Each of its ninety cartographical sections was as large as a tablecloth, the infants Romulus and Remus decorating the cartouche were stockier than Michelangelo's Moses; the she-wolf suckling the foundlings was the size of a mammoth. Every pavement and passageway, every manhole cover

and water trough. Every stream and open sewer, every rooftop in Rome. What astonished many observers was how little some neighbourhoods had changed. Yes, there had been demolitions to make way for the vast quaysides raised to imprison the rebellious Tiber, and the Duce in his wisdom had torn down or straightened many streets, but there were alleys a block or two from the waterfront where the resemblance to the portrayal on the Tabula was still remarkable. Sections of the Via Giulia had hardly changed at all.

In some portions, the streets showed no paving, instead, the crypts and catacombs beneath. Here was Rome without a skin, a subterranean metropolis of unpoliceable depths and interconnected darknesses, a backstage unseen except by vermin. There was something frightening about the map's completeness, one editorial commented. A poet who claimed to have seen the marvel remarked on his deathbed: "One understands why the word 'exquisite' may be applied to pain."

The Nazis pretended to observe its exhibition with faintly amused indifference—there was a map back in Germany the size of a lake, they said, but in fact they were behind its reappearance and gifting to the Papacy. Seeing it would be good for the Romans, Hauptmann reasoned; they would trust their German overlords as protectors of their motherland's culture while the barbarian Allies hurled bombs on the Eternal City and its treasures. Tickets would be made available once the necessary restoration work and archival photography had been completed; this would provide an opportunity for pocket-lining, money-laundering, and mistress-impressing. Italians would pay anything to jump a queue. The map would take at least some Romans' minds off the war and their troubles. That might be no bad thing.

He was interested in gullibility, thought it a resource to be harvested. On the noticeboard at Gestapo headquarters, he pinned up a sign: WHO WILL JOIN THE IDIOTS' CLUB TODAY?

The Pope visited the exhibit often. At dusk his nuns knew where to find him. As the pilgrims were ushered out and the scrubwomen in, the vivid white of his robe stood out against the greying, fraying cloth backlit by candles. He had grown more careful about his security, entered St. Peter's by the secret door in the pillar near the tomb of Bonny Prince Charlie, the door approached by a hidden staircase itself approached through the crypt, a way known only to the brotherhood of friars taking care of the basilica for a thousand years.

The largest room in Europe.

One man before a map.

Women cleaning the floors beneath him.

They would look up and see him climbing the scaffolded ladders, sometimes to the fifth storey, his face leaning in so hard that it almost touched the sailcloth, as though wanting to inhale it, or to be at one with its agonising accuracy. In his right hand, a notebook, in his left, a magnifying glass.

One night, on his knees before the marvel, he kissed its frayed edging like a knight kissing a damsel's hem and was heard to whisper "Alleluia" through his tears.

The project of photographing the artefact, segment by segment, to be bound into twenty duodecimo volumes and placed in the Vatican Archive, was given to the chief librarians, Father Mancini and Father Partington, and their most senior assistants, leading a specialised team of art photographers from Milan.

Scholars wishing to study the tomes would need to apply seven years in advance, to the Holy Father himself, with a list of proper reasons. "Most applicants can expect to be refused," Father Mancini remarked in a newsmagazine interview. Pushed by the reporter to appear more generous, Father Partington replied, "The purpose of a library is not to share but to safeguard."

The reporter's work was syndicated internationally under several pseudonyms, but her real name was Marianna de Vries. She and Fathers Mancini and Partington worked carefully on concocting and disseminating fictions about the unavailability of the map. Meanwhile, every high-quality photograph was passed to the Escape Line an hour after it was developed.

Forgotten squeeze-throughs, old back streets, ruined walkways, lost pavements. Tunnels from the long ago, sunken aqueducts, sewers, manholes. The burrows beneath the church of San Nicola in Carcere and the passageways off the Largo di Torre Argentina where Julius Caesar was murdered. Ossuaries. Vaults. Undercrofts. Cisternae. The stables and lanes beneath the Villa Farnese. Culverts and scurry-holes, secret paths to the river, shafts leading into the flood-defence walls. Stairs that led down to the Tiber, long obscured by old timberwork, but planks could be crowbarred out and the hidden places entered.

Twenty vast books, on the Ambassador's floor.

Volume IX is what she needs. So heavy to lift.

The colours. The grace of line. Such fine detail.

She smears cork on her face and slips down through the rickety back stairs.

In the cold, smoky dusk of the Vatican gardens, she steals past the quartet of tall pines whose overspreading

branches make a lattice of the sky. Past the little ruined orangery and the armless statue so blunted by time that nobody remembers who it once portrayed.

Wind stirs up grit. Dead leaves. Earthen smells.

A surveillance plane over Parioli turns heavily like a whale. The quarter-moon low over Trajan's Forum.

Taking the key from beneath the loose brick on the potting shed windowsill, she unlocks the gate to the rose garden and enters that place of disturbing stillness and thorns. Roses, Paolo used to say, are impossible to kill once they root. He disliked them, thought them vulgar, not worth the effort. In winter, their true hostility on view.

A robin turns to stare.

Fat worm in its beak.

A street cat on a high broken wall.

Ahead of her, the quattrocento fountain of the three granite Fates. Spinning and cutting a thread long rotted away, their shapely, empty hands now purposeless.

Squeezing between the ancient oak and the kitchen garden wall, she brushes off the gravel and raises the hefty manhole cover stamped "SPQR." As she lowers herself down into the space like a submariner entering a hatch, the damp, cast-iron ladder is shockingly cold to the touch. A thousand years ago, this was an icehouse for a corrupt Pope's wine, although some say that the dark, cold place was also a murder hole, where prisoners were shut in for ever and forgotten.

In the nook of medieval blockwork, she finds the bicycle lamp in the resting place where she left it, hooks it to the chain around her neck, but the battery turns out to have weakened and the puny yellow beam is almost useless as she enters the narrow, curling passageway in the rear wall.

Twenty paces bring her to a stiff, head-high rusted gate, which she unlocks with the key disguised as one of the acorns set into its metalwork.

Now she reaches, hopes, finds in the murk—always she expects it to be gone but always it is there—the heavy sisal twine that she began trailing through the labyrinth seven months ago.

Through conduits, caverns, dripping grottoes, a catacomb, along a ledge of sandy granite leading over a drop she has never had the nerve to look down at. Through echoes. Roiling dust. A cave little more than a pothole.

Cold. The stench of lichen. A strange, chalky musk. The *plink plink* of some dribbling liquid she knows to taste sweet. Through the burial chamber of disgraced Cardinals, through the low cavern of stalagmites, up the cast-iron ladder set into the well shaft, down the culvert that is said to lead all the way to the island in the Tiber, but the maze is so treacherous and the corbelled roof so fragile that no one in centuries has attempted it. Haunted, so they say, by the gloomy old Visigoths. Ghosts you need to dread because they look like ourselves.

Through a curling cave of water. Along an alcove that must be squeezed through. This necropolis is where Derry goes when life in the apartment becomes too much to bear but she doesn't know how this can be borne. Twenty centuries above your head. Fifty centuries below. Through the cavern of a thousand wildcats—the ammoniac stench, the crawling horror of their purrs. The crunch as you step on gnawed bones.

Eyes watching her from the murk. Thumbs-up gestures. Startled curses. Past hollows in which escapees play cards or try to sleep. A Stars and Stripes chalked on the back wall of a grotto. An escapee quietly singing. Someone squeezing a wheezing melodeon.

"There war twa sisters, side by side,
Sing ay day. Sing ay dee.
The young one fa young Johnny cried.
Now boys, attend to me."

In six minutes, she is beneath St. Peter's Square. Above her, the pilgrims will be singing hymns, chanting rosaries, queuing at the basilica's doors, in the sunlight that the realm she is travelling has never seen. The gurgle of water, the screech of a rat. The feel of the twine between her fingertips.

Surfacing, half an hour later, into the ruins of the modern university built on the curtilage of what was once an asylum for nuns. Nightwatch-men have heard spectral sisters wailing in the dead groves. On the feast of All Souls, the place is avoided.

Past the mound of burnt blackboards, by the ashpit of fifteen thousand textbooks, the basketball hoops where three students said to be Communists were hanged. A yawning pit that was going to be a swimming pool before the Nazis arrived; there have been midnights when she saw corpses dumped on its cracked, dead floor.

Approaching the pool now, through a drift of sepia mist, she sees by the lifeguard's hut the unmistakable

shape of a human form, slumped in a mangled deckchair.

As she crosses herself and moves to hurry on, she is startled by what she thinks at first is some trick of the dusk. But the illusion comes again.

He is breathing.

The figure slowly stands, fear sluices through her stomach. It occurs to her that she has no weapon, probably wouldn't use one if she had. He is still. Long arms. Hands in pockets. Black trilby.

"Who are you?" she manages to ask.

"You didn't think I'd let you come out here on your own."

"Hugh, *per l'amor di Dio*. You gave me a heart attack."

"I'm relieved to know you've a heart. *Andiamo.*"

"You are not coming with me, Hugh."

"We'll make a few drops along the way. I've arranged transport."

He picks up a haversack and walks on.

"Hugh—"

"You'll need to drive."

"What?"

He shrugs. "You know I can't."

He leads her down steps, through an empty double doorway, into a burnt-out basement. Past the black iron cagework of a wrecked elevator shaft, through the charred rooms where Egyptology and Archaeology were once to be studied, scorched posters of ibises and gem-studded sarcophagi and leopards with human heads.

Across the playing fields, through a hedge, emerging into the back street used by rubbish trucks and women of the night, now quickly to the watchmaker's doorway where two sets of workmen's overalls are always stored for Choir members on Rendimento. Then down the winding hill, towards the square. Across his back, in the haversack, seven bundles of banknotes. His pockets—he shows her—quickly stuffed with bottles of diarrhoea medicine. By the bus depot near the bombed trattoria, the garbage truck spews stinking fumes. Even the gulls seem to wheel away disgusted. A binman climbs out, steps onto the footplate at the back.

They enter the cab.

She drives.

He can speak seven languages and give lectures in Latin. Never learned to drive. Claims there wasn't the need.

Past the high, moonlit chapels. By the prison. The campaniles. In the distance, the cupola of a church whose name she can't remember, where her husband made his first Holy Communion. The truck's gears clank, the stick hefty and resistant.

Past palaces she has visited, in some of which she was courted. In the side alley off Via Segundo, she draws the truck to a hissing stop—the routine is to cover your face and walk quickly but don't run from the cab. Leave the engine growling behind you, do not stop to speak to the garbageman, for he must never hear your voice or see your features, even briefly, or he'd be able to identify you under interrogation.

"Hugh, you don't have to come."

"Get out, Jo. Go quickly."

Hurrying away with him, she hears the truck grunt its way down the alley in reverse, on its way banging into a line of bins.

The expletive he utters shocks her. She didn't know he knew it.

A walk of four and a half minutes, past a shuttered-up market and the hulks of parked cars, past a long line of Nazi posters—"THE FÜHRER IS YOUR FRIEND"—and they come to a ground-floor apartment window below which a treble clef has been daubed in white paint. Checking left, checking right—no one is coming—he pulls the medicine bottles from his pockets and places them as quietly as possible, given that his hands are trembling, on the sill. The window juts upward, the bottles are efficiently gathered in, and the window clunks closed again before they have taken a couple of paces. Fourteen seconds for the whole operation. Derry says it must be cut to ten.

"Good woman," the Monsignor whispers.

"Good man," she replies.

"Next stop. No rest for the wicked."

She can tell he's afraid, can hear it in the over-deliberate steadiness of his breathing and in the peculiar heaviness of his tread. Like someone trying not to slip on ice. He has an abscess under a tooth, she knows, the pain must be dreadful. She'd like to take his hand, but she mustn't, he'd hate that. Sometimes their shoulders bump as they walk.

A patch of broken pavement, crowbarred-up cobblestones.

By Via Setente, a gable-high mural of a scowling Mussolini—"*IL DUCE HA SEMPRE REGIONE* "—"the Duce is

always right" has been given a Hitler moustache and splattered with dripping splotches of whitewash. On Via del Quirinale, the trunk of an old Fiat up on blocks is very slightly ajar. He pulls it open, places the haversack of cash in the sparewheel well, pushes the trunk closed, walks on. A wolf-whistle sounds from a rooftop across the street, he whistles back, they keep walking. By the time they've reached the corner, they have heard the boot open and shut, then the clunk of a closing front door.

"Great to be rid of that," he murmurs.

"Where now?"

"Hurry on."

Down the bombed-out lane where an Escape Line sympathiser has arranged for any remaining streetlights to be broken, across a back yard, they come to a stile. She helps him over, into swampy wasteground, where they pick through a trio of barbed-wire fences. Ahead of them, at the far side of the field, the university's wrecked gymnasium, sagging into the mud now, bare window frames charred. Furls of moss and ivy on collapsed scaffolding.

Through a fourth barbed-wire fence, through the asylum's forgotten cemetery. Stone angels on mausoleums stare grimly at the moon. Past the silhouette of a seven-foot statue, an arms-folded nun, head missing, a skinny vixen snouts among graves.

Warehouses, crooked lamp posts, a steeple. An empty bus passes on the street.

"There it is," she tells him. "The safehouse."

The tall-chimneyed garage forty metres down the way, scrapped cars in the forecourt. Esso sign gnawed by rust.

"In the loft, Jo?"

She nods.

An owl hurroos in the cherry laurels behind them and bolts for its scampering prey.

"You're certain this is the place, Jo?"

"*Sono certa*."

Flurries of wind move dust. Two people, a courting couple, leave their shadow, walk in the direction of the avenue. Fingers of cloud cross the moon.

He nods towards the garage. "Does all seem as usual?"

"I'm not sure."

"Do they keep a lookout?"

"One of them watches from the chimney."

"Something isn't right, Jo. Don't you think?"

She knows what he means. There is fear on the breeze.

"I've the feeling we should leave, Jo."

"We'll look through the window. If anything's wrong, we go."

For a gangly man, he moves with a silence she finds strange and disconcerting. Her own steps sound like drumbeats beside his. No light from inside the workshop. A cat creeps across the floor. The heavy, padlocked chain across the forecourt is broken in two, a black-rimmed piece of paper gummed to the petrol pump:

OWING TO RATIONING,
FUEL MAY ONLY BE DRAWN
BY REGULAR CUSTOMERS
Ingegnere Sgr Aldo Sciachi

What to do? he asks with his eyes.

"Round the back, Hugh. Follow me."

She tries to go quietly, but the walkway surrounding the workshop is covered with gravel. They come to a filthy door. He tries it.

"Locked," he says.

She stamp-kicks it, hard, as Derry has trained them to do, and the old, rusted bolt gives way.

Inside, musty stillness. Metal hooks in the pillars where the spanners and wrenches used to hang.

He's breathing so hard that it alarms her as he switches on his torch.

"Hugh, are you unwell?"

Hand on his chest. He says nothing.

The bicycle lamp's beam sweeps emptiness. Looters have been in. The cash drawer is broken open. Tools gone from their shelves.

Bare dirty walls, clean rectangles that used to house girlie calendars and tyre charts. The long tool chest she noticed before is missing. A dustbin has been emptied into the workpit. The glassed-off cubicle where the

mechanic used to brew his burnt-wheat coffee has been ransacked: smashed windows, torn-out files, a carpet of strewn logbooks.

The loft's secret door sagging open, half-wrenched from its hinge.

Still hoping, she gives the code whistle, the opening four notes of Beethoven's Fifth, but no reply.

"Shall we go up, Hugh?"

He nods.

"Could we pray?"

He bows his head.

"Father," he whispers in Latin. "Prepare us."

"Amen."

Ascending behind him, she sees in torchlight two shakedowns improvised from a couple of wrecked car seats. A hammock slung from the roof joist. Spilled beer bottles. Empty tuna cans. Mounds of bloodied bandages. Scattered playing cards.

There's a smell she doesn't want to think about. Handfuls of the slates are missing; she can see the leer of the gibbous moon through the jags. A taste like rusty water in the dust. As she moves beneath the joists, head bowed so low that the cross-beam scrapes against her back, she happens into the part of the loft they must have used as a lavatory. Do not vomit, she tries to tell herself. Eyes streaming. Hot throat.

"Jo?" he calls from across the space.

Reversing through the attic, wiping her mouth with the back of her wrist. Stomach in boiling knots.

"Are you ill, Jo?"

"I've just thrown up."

"My poor Giovanna," he says quietly. "What have we done to you?"

"Listen," she whispers. Turning towards the punctured slates.

Scrambling down from the attic. Gulls shrieking in the eaves. The sound of a StuG is known to all Romans. The ponderous, gurgling whine of the armoured car's engine bearing the weight of the heavy machine gun on its roof. Even the city's sparrows have begun to imitate the grinding *eck-eck-ee* that means death.

When you hear a StuG, there is no point in running. Do not make it worse for yourself. No human can outrun a StuG. Your only hope is to surrender and plead.

As it grunts to a halt on the courtyard, its searchlight blinks on, finding knotholes and splits in the shed's walls.

Rays of swirling midges.

Probably too late already.

"*Halt,*" comes the roar as they run.

Through the glim of flashlights behind them, the gruff cough of Lugers. He has blood pressure, oughtn't to be running, she's no idea where they're going, through a strange, malodorous zone of the wasteland, a stagnant boggy place of green pools and skeletal hackberry trees, and now, through the pines, she sees the silhouette of the asylum graveyard and grabs him by the cuff, tugs him towards a gap.

Bullets whirring. Shrieking soldiers. She prays they haven't brought dogs. From a pouch in the lining of her jacket she pulls a handful of ground eucalyptus, sprinkles it.

Through the thorns, over barbed wire, by the graves and blackened statues and the stump of what was once a vast stone cross. He's weakening, coughing, not *able* to run, but she bawls that he'll have to, the Germans are gaining, she can see them by moonlight in twos and ragged threes, advancing, flanking out, stalking steadily as hunters, now beckoning to the reinforcements that must have arrived from the barracks. A wraith of mist glides from the west.

Dragging him onward, along a dog-legged path, sunken graves on either side. Crooked yews, boots on stones, and the croak of woken rooks. The Germans getting closer, she can hear police whistles and shouts, *Hier drüben, Hier drüben,* and an excited trooper's laugh, like a schoolboy's at his first party, and leftward, up the brow of a hill planted with mausolea and memorials. In the glint of the searchlight, filthy vases that once held flowers.

A flare lights up the wasteland, exploding like a new star.

A figure arises before them, massive in the mist. Cleaver in hand like a butcher's blockman.

On his head, a Wehrmacht steel helmet. In his mouth, a lit cigar.

Some ancient trick of moonlight makes his balaclava-wrapped head an object carved of ice.

So it's over. She raises her hands. Boots running near the fence. A hundred thousand times she has anticipated this moment, wondered what it would be like, at the words she would say, but the shock is like a punch to the throat. She will not weep, that would please them. Will not beg or bargain.

His breathing is steady. Globes of smoke from his mouth.

"Hello, my old friends," he says.

They don't move.

He grabs them.

"I'm back, are you blind? It's me—Angelucci. Come this way."

"Enzo!"

Along the rutted path, down a mound, through the firs; past the high stone forehead of a horse. Before them, in a hollow, a blackened mausoleum, he's cajoling them, tottering, through its narrow cast-iron door, into a chamber of stone shelves on which the granite caskets are so large that they seem like altars. Skulls graven into the stonework; crests of hawks and lionesses.

Slamming the door behind him, he squeezes his huge right fist through a gap, turns the key in the lock, pulls it out. Now hefting an iron girder into position as a wedge. Grunting and swearing as he works it into place. Rivulets of sweat as he turns to them.

Infantrymen shouting in the cemetery. She hears them fanning out.

From a canvas bag hung on a protruding brick-end he pulls two cleavers, the triplets of the one he has in his belt.

The Monsignor refuses. She takes one.

Angelucci gestures towards a casket.

"Get in," he says.

"What?"

"The top one is empty. Move."

"I can't."

"*Now*. You too, Padre."

"But what about yourself?"

"I'll take three of these bastards with me and hurt the hell out of four."

He clenches his hands to give her a leg-up, she starts climbing the shelves.

"Both of you," he seethes. "Do it now, Padre. The top."

In the coffin, they watch as Angelucci hauls closed the heavy lid over them, and it scrapes into place, summoning darkness. Hear the dogs in the graveyard beyond, yike-yikeing at the night. Beside her, Hugh's breathing, the smell of his hair, the rasp of his chin where he must have forgotten to shave this morning. He is whispering the rosary, its Aves barely audible, and she steadily takes his hand as she waits for the thuds on the studded door. To drown out the battering ram, she prays.

For Delia and poor Blon, for Enzo and Derry, for Johnny May and Frank Osborne, for Marianna, for their loved ones. If this is it, this is it. For the prisoners, for the Jews. Her dying prayer will be for Enzo's wife, a woman she never met, a woman who didn't deserve to die and who will soon have her husband with her again.

Silence.

Eternal.

No breathing.

No thuds.

The coffin lid is opened. Enzo's acorn-coloured eyes.

"They've gone," he says in Italian. "We're safe."

19

THE VOICE OF ENZO ANGELUCCI
8TH NOVEMBER 1962
From transcript of BBC research interview, reel 2,
conducted Bensonhurst, New York City

I'd returned to the city a week or so before, laying low, keeping quiet, but earlier that same night, I get back to the Vatican. First guy I seen was Sam Derry.

Looks tired, pale, seven types of white. Tells me Jo's gone to this *attico*, followed by the *Monsignore.* Derry's worried, he just got a tip-off on goon action in that neighbourhood. So I head straight back out, barely took a drink of water, I'm gone.

See, I know that part of Rome, me and my street buddies used to knock around in the graveyard as tykes. Took girls there, drinking beer, play a little cards, whatever. Fight with your old man, you'd run away to the boneyard a few nights. You wouldn't be disturbed. Who'll come looking, right?

Matter fact, earlier that week, I'd slept a couple of nights in that same mausoleum. As kids, we all knew about it, the empty stone casket, all the rest. It was a place you and your girl went when you hadn't no place else. A lot of time you'd just talk, or sleep a while and smoke. Youngsters always want to sleep and smoke. Same as now. But there was other times, too. That mausoleum saw some romancing, let me tell you.

Allora, when I heard where the loft was, I got an idea of the route Jo and the *Monsignore* must be taking. So I goes there, watch an hour. Smoke a pack. Smoke some more. Then I hear the Germans coming, see their flares, hear the dogs. I seen Jo and the *Monsignore* trying to get across the wasteground. Managed to make a way over. Saved their asses.

No, I didn't let them leave the mausoleum for a long time. Too dangerous, I figured. We spent the rest of the night talking, I fed them chocolate and stale biscuit. I'll be honest, they was pretty shaken up, the *Monsignore* especially. Jo was okay. Considering.

I mean worried to hell about the three guys who disappeared from the *attico*. Worried about the Gestapo, Hauptmann, you name it. Was the three guys arrested, was they dead? Had they squealed? See, we didn't know nothing. That's when you're scared. Not knowing is worse than the worst.

I told them what happened to me, where I'd been, the whole skinny. When my wife died, *che riposi in pace*, I took the babies to her people in the countryside. Our apartment got destroyed in the bombardment, whole building, boom. Face down. Like some drunk got a baseball bat in the back of the head. Seven-storey walk-ups smashed to pieces on the street. Many neighbours got killed, there wasn't nowhere else to go. The babies was better off in the back country anyhow, there was food, fresh water, no bombs. And their grandparents—who never liked me—was good with them, I got to say. The Italian country people—the "*contadini*," we call them—love a child the way they love a new meadow.

At first when I made it back to Rome after a hundred-and-twenty-mile nightwalk—on the way slept in quarries, escarpments, a vineyard, Christ, when I think. These days I can barely sleep in a bed. Back then, some hole in the ground, no problem. Back in Roma, I got a billet in a safehouse I knew in Prati with two Scots and five Bostonians, one of them was a Bren-gunner I remember, Seaforth Highlander. Landlady a Maltese widow, fine person, mighty brave. Mrs. Chevalier. Late husband worked for Thomas Cook, I think it was. Or maybe a bank teller. Mrs. Chevalier starved herself to feed you.

Truth is, I ain't built for company. You got nothing to say I'm up to hear.

Family? Sure. Friends? Sure. We was gonna be friends, we'd be friends already. Anyone else? Talk to the marines, bud. You bore me.

You got no jurisdiction on my attention just 'cause you talk too loud.

Some opinion you got? I ain't saying you're wrong. But I can scarcely contain my indifference.

For a while it was okay. But it got like a nightclub in there, dudes playing piano, having fights. Men cooped up together is a recipe for fights. "You did this, you said that, you looked at me strange." Be getting me down

that Mrs. Chevalier and her daughters was hungry. I'd feel the husband's spirit saying to me, Enzo, you're eating my wife's food, hit the bricks, you schmuck. I wasn't the type of guy takes the food out of no woman's mouth. Done some shit in my time but never that. I'm saying, how would you like it if your mother was hungry? Couldn't sleep none. Walked out one midnight.

Went to the cemetery by myself, slept right there in the hackberries. Safe. Dry. Easy to get out in a hurry. Good cover to hide in, but many ways out. That's what you want, the good ways out. One thing I learned from my time with the Choir. And I always tell my kids, that's what you want in life—except in marriage. In marriage you need to find the ways to stay in.

Slept happy in that cemetery. The dead don't bother me none. It's the living you got to be scared of.

Do a little trapping in the bushes, you got rabbits, maybe squirrel. Hungry guy ain't too fussy. Main thing, stay alive. Search around the old graves, you got a plant grows crazy, in Italy we call it *lattuga*, wild lettuce. I was used to a little hunger. That was Rome back then. People here in New York always saying they like Italian food, yadda yadda. Let me tell you, Italian food when I was a kid was you're hungry half the week. Three meals a day? Get out of here. My parents used to say, "*La fame rende dolci i fagioli duri*." Hunger makes hard beans sweet.

Funny thing, I remember there was this new stream, a tiny branch off the Tiber, but I knew every pebble of that neighbourhood, where I got into mischief as a kid, and that stream wasn't there back in them days, I was certain. It got formed by the bombs. See, the Tiber's what they call a sinuous river. Still evolving. Hard to tame. Wants to go where she wants. Any chance to spill, she spills. So, new streams like this one. No fish or nothing, only white frogs and leeches and freshwater shrimps the size of golf balls. It wasn't no Vegas. But better than someplace you didn't want to be. I just wasn't ready for the apartment in the Vatican. Grieving for my wife. Wanted to do that alone. People got their different ways of crying. Mine's alone.

Some nights I crossed the fence, mooched around the ruins of the university. Never know what you find over there. Maybe something you could sell. Copper doorknobs. Electrical fuse wire. Furniture. Clothes in the lockers. See, clothes was scarce in Rome; you could move clothes if you had them. Books that don't make no sense, some in strange languages you never heard of, but they might be worth a buck or two, you always got students in Rome. These three cleavers I got. In the kitchen of the university. Couple of people died in there. I seen the blood on the walls. Seen the machine-gun cartridges on the floor. People died there.

My plan was, find some stuff to hock, send the dough to my in-laws for the *bambini*. 'Cause a man don't support his children is a piece of crud, I don't care. You might be on Skid Row, *non mi interessa*, feed your kids. They didn't ask to be here. Do what's right.

Then, somehow, when the time was right, plan was to go back into the Vatican. 'Cause I didn't got no place else. Everything was gone. And who's gonna live in a fukkin graveyard the rest of his life? The stuff I intended to sell, I stashed in the mausoleum. And we stayed there all night, Jo, the *Monsignore* and me. After a while, we heard the birds. It was dawn.

The goons would be searching the neighbourhood. They got roadblocks. Dogs. But I had this feeling if we followed that new stream, it might take us to the Vatican. We could see the dome in the distance. It ain't something you'd miss, right?

A heavy fog came down. It didn't bother us none. Just walk in the water, keep following the water, like it says in Ezekiel or someplace. And that's what we did, me, the *Monsignore*, and Jo. Took us right to the east of St. Peter's Square. Little pool in the back, near the gardens.

On the way, I seen a dead goldfinch. Just laying there on a boulder. So I guess that was what we say in Italian is "*un presagio*." An omen.

I didn't like seeing it. Those things I don't mock.

That's how I came back to the Choir.

And the omen I seen, God have mercy on Rome.

Dio abbia pietà di Roma. E tutta l'Italia.

A terrible thing was waiting to happen.

Twenty-fourth day of March, year of 1944.

Satan went walking in Italy.

20

SATURDAY 25TH MARCH 1944
08.07 HOURS
Coded communiqué sent by diplomatic courier

From: Osborne, His Majesty's Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Holy See, now in refuge in Vatican City

To: The War Office, Italian Section, Whitehall, London

Subject: Massacre

It is my painful duty to report to His Majesty's government, and in particular the Prime Minister and the Right Honourable Foreign Secretary, on the matter of recent events in Rome.

The Cabinet will be aware that lurid rumours are circulating here and are proliferating by the hour. For that reason, I cannot offer certainty as to the veracity of particular details, but the grim central elements are verifiable.

In as much as my contacts and I have been able to ascertain them, the plain facts are as follows:

On Thursday 23rd March, the day before yesterday, at 15.56 hours, local time, in a residential neighbourhood not far from the Spanish Steps, a marching column of 156 German troops of the 3rd Battalion, 11th Company, SS Police Regiment, entered Via Rasella, a narrow, sloped thoroughfare some 850 yards long. This show of strength had for some time been a daily occurrence, following the same route, the participants goose-stepping. Often, they attracted the derisive mimicry of children.

Partisans of the Roman resistance, some in disguise as pavement sweepers, courting couples, and passers-by, had stationed themselves on the shabbier corners and in the hallways that give onto the street. As the final rows of the German column, marching in formation, reached the midpoint of Via Rasella, the *partigiani* opened fire and detonated a 40-lb bomb that had been hidden in a dustcart or perambulator. Some thirty Germans were torn to pieces; others were wounded in terrible ways.

The bombers escaped, some through a traffic tunnel near the end of Via Rasella, others through derelict buildings on Via della Scuderie or up steps leading to Via dei Giardini. By now, the surviving Germans, many of them frightfully injured, all shocked, some deafened by the ferocity of the blast, assuming they had been attacked from the apartment houses on both sides of the narrow street, opened fire wildly, up towards the overlooking windows and balconies. Civilians were killed; I am unable to say how many.

Within minutes, Gestapo officers, many of them badly drunk, arrived at the scene of the attack, in armoured cars. Thursday saw the twenty-fifth anniversary of the foundation of Fascism in Italy; the Nazis, with certain lickspittles who have disgraced themselves by supporting them, had been attending a celebratory luncheon at Rome's finest hotel. Charmingly, the establishment offers the use of its swimming pool to Gestapo staffers and henchmen. Before luncheon, the party availed of the sauna. Hauptmann, the Gestapo Commander, was not present at the luncheon. I am told that he was suffering from a cold and fever—the city has seen many outbreaks of the "Roman Flu" of late—and had returned to his quarters at the confiscated Palazzo Landini and gone to bed.

Two Secret Police officers were sent there by motorcycle and sidecar to rouse him. An informant saw one of them enter the Palazzo at 16.22 hours, the other standing guard on the street outside, sub-machine gun in hand. Clearly, further attacks were expected. Indeed, erroneous reports of them commenced within minutes, some reaching my contacts. Bombs were said to have destroyed the train station, the mayor's office, the Fascist Party headquarters, the Palazzo di Giustizia and the Anagrafe, where births, marriages, and deaths are recorded. The Pope had been kidnapped or had urged armed resistance or was now on a seaplane to Kent. Mussolini was dead. Mussolini was in Rome. A coordinated or perhaps spontaneous attack of misinformation. The city was wild with talk. Many, including the Mother Superior of the Casa della Divina Provvidenza, reported apparitions of the previous Holy Father, Pius X, who died in 1914.

A well-placed asset has described to me the chaotic scene in Gestapo High Command, Via Tasso, as

Hauptmann, "white, sick and vomiting," arrived there at 16.59 with the two plainclothesmen who had fetched him. Women members of staff weeping; machine guns and belts of ammunition being passed about the corridors; the call was for immediate and unremitting vengeance. Hauptmann was roared at by some of his staff, who, astonishingly, appeared to think him lenient regarding the Romans. "Are you happy, you have got us all killed?"

Giving back as good as he got, he barracked them for insubordination and cowardice, warning that further disrespect would be punished with utmost severity. Hitler himself now came on the radio from the Wolfsschanze in Poland, ranting with obscenities to Hauptmann that Via Rasella and that entire quarter of Rome were to be dynamited immediately, every man, woman, and child to be arrested and deported. "There shall be a canyon—*Eine Schlucht!* where Via Rasella once stood." Staff overhearing Hitler's voice greeted it with loud and prolonged cheers. A soldier cursed in Hauptmann's direction. Hauptmann drew a pistol and threatened to shoot him.

Here, the picture becomes a little opaque. I am unable to apprise the Cabinet of how the sequence unfolded, but a discussion over the radio ensued between Hitler, Hauptmann and a number of other Gestapo officers, and presently, the order was changed. Vengeance would be wreaked at a ratio of ten to one. For every dead German, ten Romans would die. This would happen within twenty-four hours.

Hauptmann in Via Tasso commenced assembling the names. Staff were commanded to bring him the files on every so-called political prisoner in Rome. Men already awaiting execution were first to be placed on the list; soon came prisoners charged with capital crimes and likely, in Hauptmann's assessment, to be found guilty. Now those who had given succour to escaped Allied prisoners and those caught assisting the Jews of the ghetto. Now Communists, socialists, members of guilds and trade unions, journalists who had written unsupportively of Fascism. Now a student who had cracked a joke about Himmler in a debating society at the university.

All Thursday night, Hauptmann worked on the death list, pausing twice for a twenty-minute rest, during which he slept head down on his desk. In the early hours of Friday, yesterday, the records for every inmate of Regina Coeli prison were summoned. "Best if those on the list can be Jews," he was heard to say. "But others may have to suffice." Going through the files took most of the morning; he was desperate to find more names. Demonstrators; smugglers; non-Fascist army officers. Satirists; actors; common vandals. Now pickpockets, street-brawlers, then those on remand, now some not yet sentenced, now some not yet even charged. These were added to the document at the head of which was written in Hauptmann's neat hand, the bleak portmanteau word "*Todes-kandidaten*." Death-candidates.

The names having been selected, the choice of a place was next. Options were considered hurriedly and for various reasons rejected. In the end a cave system on the southern outskirts of the city was chosen, the remainder of an ancient Roman catacomb. Hauptmann, I am told, felt that this would be a suitable venue, for instead of the effort of digging a mass grave one could dynamite closed the mouth of the caves.

Afternoon came. The prisoners were led from their cells and taken to the caves in a long fleet of trucks, a drive of some thirty minutes, the Nazis all the while squabbling between themselves—one or two of them wagering as to whether the correct number of those to die had been reached. One officer, I am told, was given the task of calculating the total number of bullets that would be required. The Nazis do not like to be wasteful.

Not long before 16.00 hours, the murders commenced. Five men at a time were led into the caves and shot. Then the next five, and the next. On it went. Those awaiting outside had the terrible fate of hearing the gunfire and the pleas for mercy from within, and of realising that their own turn would come presently. The gunmen were told that they had four hours in which to complete the task. Extra rations would be given if the timetable were achieved. The officers led the murders in person so as to encourage the common soldiery by example. Brandy was distributed to the executioners, many of whom became shakingly, spewingly drunk, with the result that the operation began to slow down as the time wore on, and the officers needed to roar and cajole as darkness came down, as they were falling behind schedule.

This brings me to a part of this report which, for personal reasons, is extremely painful to write. No list of those murdered is available but I have it on reliable authority that several of the very many Italian citizens who have risked their lives to help Allied escapees were among those slaughtered so brutally yesterday. They were fine, good men, some of whom I was honoured to count as friends. I go further and call them brothers. God have mercy on their brave souls. Britain and her Allies in the love of freedom must never forget them.

Two hours ago, around dawn, I ventured a hundred yards out of the Vatican, by a dark and unpopulated side street used by night people for various purposes, for I like to go out once a day, in the very early morning, just to tell my conscience that I have refused to obey the Fascist thugs' orders to stay caged. Nazi posters had appeared on every wall of the filthy back street where few decent people ever go. The ink was

still sticky to the touch.

A passing beggarman told me that similar bills were pasted to every wall in Rome; he had walked from Termini to our current whereabouts as the sun arose and had never seen such a profusion of posters, whole forests of them, everywhere, on lamp posts, bus shelters, gables, dustbins, shop doors, hoardings, school gates, the marble plinths of statues, the shuttered cafés and kicked-in synagogues, the information placards outside the Colosseum. "The printers must have sweated all night," he said. It is an important custom of Italian life that obituarial notices for deceased persons are displayed publicly, often in a piazza or marketplace, so that friends and the townspeople may know where the obsequies will take place and may attend to pay respect. Even the noticeboards ordained for that sole purpose had been usurped and now flaunted the cruel filth of Nazi arrogance.

Hitler was on his way to Rome, this man of the roads assured me, would be here by this evening, intended to reinstitute crucifixion; a woman in Trastevere had heard this reported on the wireless.

Returning to my quarters, I saw that one of the Nazi posters had been nailed to the front door of the building in which I am at present writing this report, an apparition that disturbed me greatly. The Vatican is protected closely and guarded heavily. The only well-known way in and out is the way I had taken myself some thirty minutes previously, yet I had seen no one come or go during my walk. The poster had been placed there by an enemy within.

Here, I give my translation of the printed text:

"On the afternoon of 23rd March 1944 criminal gangsters executed a bomb attack against a column of German police transiting through Via Rasella. As a result of this ambush, thirty men of the German police were killed and several wounded. The disgusting atrocity was carried out by Communist bandits. An investigation is still being made to clarify the extent to which this criminal deed is attributable to Anglo-American involvement. The German Command has therefore ordered that, for every murdered German, ten Communist bandit criminals will be shot. The order has been carried out."

These terrible days beg stark questions, on which the War Cabinet and the Foreign Secretary will wish to ruminate. For myself, I have discerned something that I long suspected to be the case, but I see it with new eyes and am unable to put it in a better light. Rome is run by a man in whom human pity and, even, fear of retribution, are quite dead.

The events of the past forty hours will ramify, in serious ways. I fear that we are entering a new chapter.

21

SUNDAY 26TH MARCH 1944
22.47 HOURS

Good evening, Commander Hauptmann."

"Evening, sentries. Stand at ease."
Cigarette butts fizzle on the street before them.

"Smoking on duty, boys?"

"Sir, no, sir."

"Don't smoke on duty in future. You are a soldier of the Reich, not a waiter on a coffee break."

"Sir, yes, sir."

"Anything to report?"

"Nothing, sir."

"That is good. Keep attentive. I appreciate your work."

"Thank you, sir."

"Oh, and park the car for me, would you."

"Of course, sir. Immediately."

Good boys, those. Neat and punctual. Does no harm to encourage them. Difficult few days, what with that unpleasant business at the caves. No need for a superior officer to lord it all the time. Youngsters far from their parents need a gentle word now and again. Loyalty runs best in two directions.

As usual he is careful to remove his boots when he enters the Palazzo. The floors are eighteenth-century mahogany, he would not at all care to damage them. Anyhow, to go about in stockinged feet is homelier.

Post has arrived for her. He places it in a drawer. Adjusts the ratchets of the grandfather clock.

This morning, passing the vast basilica of St. John Lateran on his motorcycle, he was taken by a notion to enter. Monks were draping the statues and crucifix in heavy purple velvet. The cloister was restful. He lit a candle for his children and Elise.

In the chapel across the square, the faithful were ascending the Scala Sancta on their knees, the steps where Christ was condemned by Pilate. For a moment, he wanted to join them, if only as a feat of endurance, but the moment burnt itself up. Its smoke has followed him to the Palazzo.

The evening is uncomfortably sticky, more like summertime than Lent. He strips off his uniform and underwear, showers in the marble bathroom off her boudoir. The water coughs and spurts, moves from hot to sharply cold, trickling, then gushing, now no more than a dribble.

Droplets of blood spatter the shower tray. He realises after a moment that a cold sore he has is bleeding.

Cursing, clutching a flannel to his mouth, he emerges from the strange-smelling steam. Wet soles on cold, hard mosaic. From her dressing room comes the sound of the gramophone playing the Mozart requiem. Lately, he has had to shave twice daily. Something about hideous Rome—the diseased water? the filthy air?—is darkening his beard and making it sprout in stubborn tufts, so he is starting to look like an Italian sloven, he feels.

Crow's feet around his eyes. Lips getting thinner. A tour guide once told him and Elise with typical Italian unctuousness that "Rome leaves her mark on every visitor's soul." Like most things Romans say, that is not true. Rome leaves her mark on your face.

He shaves, salves, dons a dressing robe and sandals. Drapes a cool, damp towel around his aching neck, opens a bottle from her cellars, the 1841 Veuve Clicquot.

It shouldn't be drunk with ice cubes.

He's going to drink it with ice cubes.

Would be pleasant to have someone to share it with.

Not easy, being alone at a time such as this. When that difficult task had to be carried out. Which no one would have wanted to happen. Perhaps it will never have to happen again. Bad business. Horrible. Some of them only in their teens. For some reason, his children feel intensely present with him tonight. Were they to

ask what he did at the caves, what words would he use? If Elise were to say, *But you didn't—but you couldn't. Tell me it didn't happen, Paul, it is vicious propaganda*? how would he meet her eyes?

He takes a glass out to the terrace, looking down at the peacocks. The male on the wall of the wishing well, preening and rustling, his wives ignoring him as they rummage around the plinth of the statue of Hercules. Irritating, the way they never stop skulking and pecking. Like tourists released from a bus. Is the restlessness because they're hungry? What do peacocks eat?

Meant to put Ann at the office onto it.

Forgot.

Find out what peacocks like.

Protect them.

Horrible, their honking cry. *May-awe. May-awe.* When you hear it at dawn, it is like something primordially vengeful. How does the Contessa live with such a racket? In a bestiary from her bedroom table, he found an illustration of a peachick, repellent in its doughy, pink, featherless baldness, like a jailer from the depths of hell. "St. Augustine attests that this animal's flesh does not corrupt after death," the writer claimed. "The beast's scream is caused by the sight of its own feet which are ugly and out of keeping with the rest of its body."

Over Parioli, a doomed bomber returning from its mission to the south, spumes of smoke from the fuselage as it commences the death-plunge. Retreating inside quickly, he closes the shutters. Not in the mood tonight to see that.

He paces the long library, smokes an American cigarette. A barbarous country but Christ, can they make cigarettes. Pours himself an Armagnac. Nibbles olives.

Downstairs, in strange mood, to the gilt-and-scarlet summer room, which has its own gramophone, a small, portable Swiss model, finer than the one upstairs. Verdi will be his companion, perhaps *La Traviata*. Or Respighi. Books here, too. Everywhere, her books.

How many of them has she read? Would examining them reveal her? He has sometimes happened upon a passage Elise underlined in a novel and has wondered why those words, instead of others, took her attention. What is it that makes them memorable to her if they are? For, of course, if they were all that memorable, they would not need underlining. Perhaps underlining is a way of holding on to what might otherwise be forgettable. No one remembers everything. Remembering is editing. If it weren't, life would be unbearable.

Summoning a sentry from the courtyard, he hands him an envelope.

"Get this over to headquarters, would you. Morning roster."

"Sir, of course."

"Lock the gates on your way. Take the motorcycle."

Another Armagnac as he listens to the bike growling its way down Via Landini. Now, a cigar as he browses the bookshelves. Some bindings need replacing, have been got at by damp and time. A French Bible. A Latin dictionary. A book of photographs of the excavations at the Largo di Torre Argentina. Good editions of Keats and Marx. An old anthology of ghost stories, *I Fantasmi di Roma* (*The Ghosts of Rome*) in which he finds a postcard of a Caravaggio's *Mary Magdalen* bookmarking a tale set in this very house, seven scrawled exclamation marks in the margins. An ancient spectre walks the Palazzo, so the chronicler has written, "the mistress of cats and all creatures feline," who was burnt as a witch at Calcata Vecchia on Good Friday 1501 despite the protestations of a young lawyer, Landini, who had tried to save her. "I have no money, sir," she was heard to say, as she was tied to the stake, "but three gifts I give thee as payment for your intercession. My blessing on your household. My presence during storms. My curse on all foes of your family."

In the sideboard drawer, an album of exquisite medieval maps of Trastevere and the Janiculum. Might fetch a handsome price from a bookdealer back in Berlin. Or could send to Elise as a birthday gift; she loves maps, thinks them meaningful, when in fact they mean nothing, are daubs, nothing more, records of the fictions that are boundaries and borderlines, things the planet never gave a curse about and never will. But now he sees that the atlas has been spoilt by a signature.

To Giovanna, on our wedding day. Walk with me. Paolo.

Folded into the pouch of the back cover, the closing paragraph of a letter written on flimsy airmail paper, in a schoolmaster's minuscule copperplate. He recognises it, has read many samples of this nigglingly neat hand.

> *if you must. But know, my dearest Jo, that you are a child of the Light. When life is violently painful, when it seems and is impossible as it has been since these evil men infested our city, know that an Immensity loved you in person from the beginning of time, not the idea of you, or your soul, but you in blood and person, and wanted you to be here. I do not call these wicked men "animals"—animals would not do what they do—Saint Francis shows that the animals are as close to God as we are—but they are poisoners of life, spitters in the divine face. Often, I am so very tired of living in the same world as them. So I know how you are feeling, I too have been to the depths. But, Jo, we can resist. That is the*

meaning of grace. Since the start of the world, since not long after the stones cooled, there have been those who said no to the fake inevitability, the filthy lie. I am sorry that we quarrelled the other day, for my bloody-mindedness and stubbornness. The work we are doing together, all of us, is so heavy to carry. It is my own vanity and bad-temperedness that I need to escape from. Say a rosary for my forgiveness, my dearest friend.

Allow God to love you.

Your H

Crumpling the paper, he sets a match to it and watches it burn in the ashtray.

Warm, the room now, his headache receding, as though the books are breathing solace into the air. He goes to the French windows—a little unsteady on his feet, he notices—for a moment can't find the lock, for a moment can't find the key then pushes them open to the Roman evening. Dusk reddening high walls. Musk from the earthen pots in which her herbs are growing with such health and abundance: salvia, rosemary, basil, tarragon. That wonderful Italian smell of a garden at night after heat and rain.

Who could be an atheist at such moments?

The Verdi spins to a close and he puts on Palestrina, wanting mildness now, the plain mercy of unaccompanied voices. Pours himself another Armagnac and lurches to the old, slightly broken-down purple velvet chaise longue, one of its legs propped up by a book. Poor author, whose midnight agonies ended up a gift to upholstery rather than literature. The room tilts and spins. Blurred clicks in his eardrums.

A memory of Jersey. He and Elise on honeymoon, the suck of the pebbles in the rip tide. They had been to the cinema—an American gangster movie, stylish, the slick, spry dialogue, the sullen beauty of the actors—and afterwards walked back to the little hotel on the strand. Another life, the "es" in the soft word "Palestrina," and another sea moving, the sea behind all music, and he realises, as it moves, that what he is seeing is a dream, so he must be asleep, sliding into the slipstream, because of the blue, and the light, and the sun glimpsed through water, and he feels himself shift, trying to swim towards the surface.

Somehow, *The Ghosts of Rome* is a presence of the dream. Yellowed pages riffle in a breeze that slams a door. A shrouded woman summons a legion from the absences on bookshelves. St. Sebastian. Allied escapees. Armless legionaries. Toppled emperors. Midnight angels. Fanged Etruscans. Freed slaves. Popes' mistresses. Marble statues of Aphrodite and Persephone clanking to stony vengefulness. Teeming at him, starlit, like ghostly murmurations.

Surfacing, he sees the eyes.

Two lifeless black pearls.

The next thing he is aware of is the sound.

A whirr, a displacement of air, like the rattling of beads. Almost unnoticeable. A purr.

"*May-awe*," it honks, regretfully.

What is sitting on his chest has a heartbeat, he can feel its pulsation. A steady, fricative thud through the warm, swelling torso. The rank stench of shit makes him gulp.

There is a moment, looking into the black pearls, when he thinks he has died, and the horrors of some childhood story have proven to be his afterlife.

And then, the thing's rage is unleashed.

The scythes of beak, pecking. The scrob of its claws.

The terrible, calm insistence of its predatory fury, talons now daggering his face and the softness of his upper arms, and the sour, choking fetor of his own blood on his palate, a slab of slit flesh he must try not to swallow, and the boiling snotty tears on his cheekbones. A screaming, furious hoot, as it stamps and gouges and butts. Its beak now clamped on his forefinger, and it shakes its head viciously from side to side, up and down, as though trying to wrench off his hand.

His robe is ripped open. Now it's going for his eyes. Methodical, purposed, its breath in croaked spurts. An inch from his right pupil. He can feel its stinking breath, and the flickering of what must be a tongue. He tries to call out, but the sentries don't hear him. Suddenly he has a grip around its dark blue throat.

It shimmers out its tail. The thousand bleak and steady eyes. Feels heavier, hotter, slippery, screeching. Elise and the children come running in, shock shining from them like haloes, and it gives a plangent squawk and bats its fabled wings as they try to drag it away from behind but it is rearing, craning, like an angered mother swan, it lurches at his daughter, who backs away in dread.

Alerted by his cries, the sentries are jostling him awake.

Somehow, a dozen books have been torn from their shelves. Filthy leaves, shredded bindings sprinkled around the rugs, or sucked into the empty grate by the breeze. To the right of the fireplace, a marble shepherd is attempting to coax a melody from a marble flute; to the left, a marble nymph is not listening and never will. From the ceiling, a triumvirate of semi-clad goddesses gaze down, chins in hands, with expressions of mild amusement or boredom. Behind them, in a blue sky studded with gemstones as lodestars, little putti are

harping, one is pissing. The peacock and his wives come to the opened French windows, staring into the wrecked room, cooing quietly together, warbling, impassive.

Shaking fingers, slopping, he pours drinks for the sentries, but, for a while, is unable to thank them in words.

One of them asks if he may smoke. In the circumstances.

Hauptmann nods.

"We must never speak of this matter," he tells them. "Never. Do you understand me? I have been overworking, that is all. It is nothing to cause you alarm."

"Yes, sir."

"Go back to your duty."

"But sir—you need a doctor. If I may say so. You have cut your face. The blood."

"A scratch. Go back to your work. I have disinfectant upstairs."

"Sir, meaning no offence, but is the lady safe and well?

"What lady?"

"Sir, me and the boys thought we saw a lady. In the upstairs window. Weeping."

"There is no lady living here."

"Of course, sir. As you say."

"Return to your post."

"*Jawohl.*"

22

MONDAY 27TH MARCH 1944
08.10 HOURS

The grey military bus turns down Via Tasso and grumbles to a halt outside Gestapo Headquarters. Seven women hurry from the building—four stenographers, a telephonist, a translator, a filing assistant. The driver steps down to check their passes as the women board in early-morning silence, followed by two plainclothes security officers.

Five Carabinieri outriders and a police car appear at the intersection, ready to lead the weekly convoy, now completed by the arrival of a StuG as rearguard. As the bus lurches out of the narrow street, accompanied by its protectors, and turns towards the domes and steeples of the old city, Wehrmacht marksmen are seen on the passing balconies. But this is only for show, nothing will happen. Commander Hauptmann has made it clear that, were this cavalcade ever to suffer the slightest interference, the reprisal inflicted on Rome would be appalling.

On board, away from the other women, Ann Brunner sits quiet and alone, in a broken double banquette near the back. Ann smokes and they do not. She is smoking now. "I don't like to pollute your fresh air," she says to her colleagues, who return to their fashion magazines or novels or private thoughts.

Normally this bus transports prisoners—their graffiti appears on the seat backs:

JESUS SAVE ME
GOODBYE MY FAMILY
LONG LIVE ITALY
MORTE AI TEDESCHI!

Manacles attached to steel railings run along the tops of the seats. Leg irons are bolted to the floor.

A pleasant day in Rome. Spring sunshine, golden blueness. A morning that makes you think of clean linen. Next Sunday will be Ann's thirty-first birthday, she remembers with a start, making a mental note to telephone her parents back in Frankfurt, if possible, and her brother, who works for the Party in Nuremberg. Officially, personal calls are not permitted from the Via Tasso office, but sometimes, if Hauptmann is out, a blind eye is turned. At other times, you can ask him. Much depends on his mood. He isn't the worst boss, the women say.

Wife is a drinker.

Daughter not his.

Himmler has it in for him.

Rome's a poor posting.

Feathers his nest by the black market and counterfeit currency.

Tow-headed. In a certain light, almost handsome.

A woman in the office knows a couple of the girlfriends he had while in Gestapo Academy, before he was married. He had a reputation as a ladies' man of the quieter sort.

Hilly, these streets, and ochre the buildings. The orchestra of bell song calling the Lenten faithful to nine o'clock Mass. An African priest in heavy purple vestments appears in a chapel doorway; from behind him, in the shadows, comes a flash of burnished gold. At the entrance to a piazza, two blue-robed nuns are distributing hot water to a quarrelsome line of fretting mothers and their bawling, barefooted children. A tankette juts into place on a sandbag-barricaded corner, near the hulk of a bombed osteria. From a blind alley, a young man comes running, there is a stutter of machine guns, and he falls.

"Dear ladies," calls the driver, "you will want to look the other way."

Onward through the city, past the hot, hateful stares and the people spitting in the bus's direction. Passing a schoolyard, she sees the children join hands, and with great deliberation turn away. A shunning they must have rehearsed.

A beggar on the street shrieks "*Puttane.*" She knows what it means.

"Dear ladies, close your windows," the driver advises. "Italians can be overexcitable."

Last week, she was ordered to accompany Hauptmann on a school visit. He wanted the event minuted in shorthand. One of his bright, fresh ideas, designed to impress them back in Berlin. Fight them in the classroom. A new battlefront.

"Girls," he told the pupils, "Germany is not your enemy but your protectress. You should think of her as your mother. And your father."

Here, some of the girls chuckled. The sight of him trying to chuckle back was frightening.

"Yes, what I have said seems silly. At your age, much does. The mother's role, as you know, is to instruct on right from wrong. When I met my own wife, I knew she would give a good example. Would say, 'This you may do, and this you may not.' And which father worth his salt will never discipline his children? He would be failing in his duty otherwise. This is plain."

None of the listeners said anything. He seemed to read their silence as agreement but that was only one of its components.

"These are matters I should like to discuss with you today as young adults aware of the meaning of responsibility. You are not kindergarteners, or infants, nor that most immature of all creatures: boys." The laugh was surrendered to him eventually, as though he had arm-wrestled it out of them. "No, you are young women. The Roman future."

His Italian was becoming efficient—he was taking lessons, working hard—but he was stiff, undemonstrative, in the way he used his hands, was unable to pinch the air between middle finger and thumb, as a Roman does to emphasise a point, or to stroke his fingernails beneath his chin to indicate dismissiveness. He understood that an intrinsic part of the language is the placing of weight, that Italian, like all languages, is a music before it is anything else, but sometimes he fumbled, placed the weight on the wrong syllables or forgot to place it at all. She could see in the girls' faces that they found him ridiculous or disconcerting. They were fifteen, sixteen. His utterances about politics were baffling. The Communist menace. *Lebensraum. Übermensch.* He might as well have been speaking Chinese.

It was only when he returned to the personal that their attention was regained, like a switch-lever being pulled in the room. "I knew a girl, a young Roman, the same age as yourselves. A beautiful young lady of irreproachable purity, from a most highly regarded Fascist family. A happy life of fulfilment and duty before her. All laid out, my dear girls, like a ballgown on a bed. Courtship. Wifehood. Motherhood. Respect. That special respect for the familial that is the bedrock of Italian life. But do you know the great error she made? Raise your hand if you can guess. The decision that ruined everything in that girl's young life? Come, do not be afraid, you may speak freely, we are friends."

The eyes of the Reverend Mother warned them to do no such thing. "Against her parents' wise advice, she permitted herself to become involved with a boy who was a Communist. Plausible. Pleasant. Flattering. Sly. Handsome in an effeminate, vulgar, pouting way. Who masqueraded as a friend of Italy but was all the time a wicked enemy. Before long, she was doing his will."

Here, some of the girls blushed. His silence was riveting. After a moment, he shook his head, stared sadly at the floor.

"I think you know what I am alluding to," he said.

"Then, delivering such and such a message. Running errands. Spreading rumours. Smuggling bullets. Faking rations. Daubing slogans. Hiding Jews. Worst of all, disseminating anti-German lies among her girlfriends at school. Taking these filthy lies home, to the neighbourhood, to the dinner table. The boy would say, 'Paint this slogan on a wall, do it for me, my treasure.'"

They frowned at the quaint endearment, which their grandparents used.

"You laugh, but then, you see, she tangled with the legal authorities. 'Damn the Führer,' she wrote. Three curt words. Nothing more. Unfortunately, yes, she had to be arrested by the Gestapo. Then, her father was arrested. Then her sisters. Then her mother. Imagine—she was the cause of her own mother's interrogation and shame. Her mother was hanged. Her father took his own life. And that girl, the age of yourselves—the age of my own beloved daughter—today is in a concentration camp in Poland."

"Enough," said the Reverend Mother.

"I beg your pardon, good lady?"

His points had been made, she said. It was time for the next class; she was certain that the girls would give due consideration to the counsel he had offered.

"I have more to say," he told her.

"Not in my school."

"I have brought chocolate for each girl."

"It isn't wanted."

"Why not?"

"We are fasting," she said. "For Lent."

He turned to them like a bad actor doing the smile of a disturbing uncle. "I have a different speech that I deliver to the idiot boys. More thunderous and threatening. As a father sometimes must. But I know that, with you, I can be gentler—because being women you are wiser. Take note of what I have said. *Heil Hitler*."

In the transcript she delivered to him that evening, he scored through the final two words. "A little too much," he remarked. "But a good day, Ann. What did you think?"

"A good day, *mein Kommandant,*" she said.

"I value your opinion."

"Thank you, *mein Kommandant*."

"We should value women more in the Party. May I offer you a drink?"

"Thank you, no, sir."

"Just so. I hope you don't mind me asking."

"Goodnight, sir."

"Are you settling in well? Is Rome to your liking?"

"The Reich is what I serve, sir, wherever it places me."

"Of course. Like us all."

"Goodnight, sir."

The bus bumps to a squeaky stop beneath a line of cypresses in front of a luxury hotel, the Halcyon, near the Spanish Steps. Marksmen are glimpsed in the ornate follies on the lawn. At a signal from the Sergeant, the riders and their bodyguards alight and, as usual on these mornings, are beckoned swiftly through the revolving door, past reception, across the alabaster lobby, down the sweep of the curving staircase and into the mint-and-eucalyptus fug of the corridor outside the women's changing rooms. A notice on the wall announces: "WELCOME, GESTAPO LADIES." Their session will last a maximum of forty-five minutes, as usual. Showering is obligatory before swimming.

In the booth, she undresses, dons her swimsuit, unravels goggles. The others are talking quietly as they undress or use the shower. A weary mop-woman swabs the wet floors and the cracked tiles above the sinks. The long hiss issues from the murk as someone throws hot water on the sauna stones.

Entering the lavatory cubicle, she locks the door. All is quiet.

No point in thinking about the danger.

Thinking won't quell it.

Her parents loom. She pushes them away.

She is a stenographer at Gestapo headquarters, knows what happens to informers. She has heard the screams from the basement, seen the photographs.

After a moment, she hears the rattle and click of the door closing in the stall beside her, the sound of the occupant humming a folk song. Then a cough. A triple knock is given, she answers it with a double, then a single. A pill bottle is rolled beneath the partition, she opens it, pulls out the scrunched-up tissue, begins to read.

Tiny handwritten questions. Requests for further detail. Dates. Routes. Ordnance. Precise times. Impossible to memorise anything through the pulsations of stress but she must. One question surprises her; it seems unusually specific.

"*Hat die Gestapo einen Polen und zwei Amerikanische Soldaten in Gewahrsam*?"

Does the Gestapo have a Pole and two American servicemen in custody?

In the distance, from the pool, she hears the echo of the women laughing and calling out and the pheep of the lifeguard's whistle. Tearing a square of lavatory paper from the roll, and a stub of pencil from the pocket of her robe, she scrawls, in careful code, whatever answers she possesses. Streets. Schedules. Surnames of recent arrestees. The location of a junction in Parioli where a roadblock is planned from tonight. There is no Pole in Via Tasso and no American servicemen. She will do what she can to answer the new questions next time, but it is getting more difficult, Hauptmann is growing suspicious. Pushes the paper into the pill bottle, rolls it back beneath the partition.

The toilet flushes in the cubicle beside her.

Emerging from the stall, she sees the mop-woman in grey drabs pause from scrubbing the sinks, her fingertip carving a sequence of question-marked numbers in the steamed-up art deco mirror.

Ann nods, stetches out a hand, altering a "7" to a "9," a "3" to a "40," and the Contessa Giovanna Landini in mop-woman's overalls trundles her cart with its arsenal of brushes through the doors of the ladies' lavatories,

removing the “CLOSED FOR CLEANING” sign as she goes.

In the pool, Ann swims breaststroke, strong and smooth, down the fast lane, the chlorinated water bringing back her fifteenth summer, when she swam for her high school, won bronze in a tournament in the neighbouring town but one, fell in love and was kissed for the first time. A toothy, clumsy kiss. Unaccomplished. Clasping hands. Lena. Full of laughter. Father, a rabbi.

Underwater, Ann somersaults. Pushes on.

23

TUESDAY 28TH MARCH 1944
06.17 HOURS

Entering the sitting room, she sees Derry and Marianna working on today's rota.

Osborne is at the bookshelf, in an old nightgown he finds comforting, given him by his brother thirty years ago. Hole through the left elbow. Stripes faded by over-laundering. Sensing her, he turns.

"Dearest Jo. *Buongiorno*. Sleep all right?"

"Bad dreams."

"Me too."

She squeezes his arm.

"Here's the roster, Jo, you're on watch," Derry says. "Thought we'd ease up on you a bit."

This morning, she will act as spotter. The task is to drift around St. Peter's Square blending with the pilgrims. A matter of keeping one's eyes open, eavesdropping on conversations. Noticing who doesn't fit.

It is an assignment she doesn't mind, for which she has a certain talent. She is observant, tactful, goes quietly among people. Often, the escapees are in disguise, but she seems to have a way of seeing through. Johnny May calls her a she-devil.

Before Christmas, the Monsignor used to be spotter-in-chief, insisting on the role, standing tall and defiant —"the size of a door," Angelucci used to say—haughty on the basilica steps in his black soutane and red sash, under a golf umbrella on days of rain or hard sun. But now it is too dangerous, an intercepted Gestapo order has revealed. Hauptmann would have him shot by a sniper.

For this duty, it used to be that she put on male clothing—a ratcatcher's overalls, a Papal Guardsman's cloak —because men will feel easier around other men, Derry advises, more given to asking assistance, coming clean. "Also, young men tend to act the idiot when women are around, and we might ration the amount of twattery we must endure." But since the massacre at the caves, the pretences feel too much to bear, bits of comic operetta nonsense of which she's grown weary. If they shoot her, so be it. She'll die in her own clothes. There are days when you must be disguised as yourself.

Blon Kiernan has been asking to come on watch. Derry always says no, this important task requires experience. Blon points out, reasonably, that there is only one way to acquire experience. Derry says he won't argue. They then proceed to argue.

This morning, worn down, he concedes. In the wake of the massacre and Hautpmann's threats, Books have been turned out of their safe-houses by terrified Romans. All possible help is needed.

"You may go as an observer, Blon. Two hours and no more. Watch the Contessa and learn from the best."

Johnny May and Angelucci will work the northern half of the piazza, Blon and the Contessa the south and around the colonnades. Marianna will be watching through binoculars from the dome. Derry gives the apprentice a few pointers.

Books will often seem anxious, glancing about, over shoulders, not like genuine pilgrims, who'll have eyes on the basilica or the papal apartment window. Books don't buy from the hawkers. Books don't join queues. Books are not part of a couple—you never see a woman with a Book. ("A pity, because no man and woman together will ever be stopped.") Books will be in twos and threes; few Books escape alone. Books will be in ill-fitting clothing they stole or begged along the journey. Look for badly lengthened trouser hems. Farmers' overalls, peasant smocks. Jacket from one suit, trousers from another, "like Welshmen attending a wedding." Too-tight boots that make them limp, too-loose boots that make them shuffle. Scratches to the face from a struggle through barbed wire or bruises where they've been in a scrap. Most Books will appear exhausted, will have been walking all night, getting whatever sleep they can in hedgerows and alleyways during daytime. Like the men of the Italian peasantry who've likely sheltered them, Books don't shave except on Sundays. A clean-shaven man who tells you he's a Book is even-money a Jerry plant. Always expect a plant. Suspect everyone.

The accents you're listening out for are American, regional English, Welsh, Scottish, Canadian—which is *not* the same as American. Also South African, Irish, Egyptian, Indian, Anzac. Use your discretion. Be attentive.

Keep your distance.

There'll be Jerry guards and Fascist police along the borderline that separates the square from greater Rome. Never approach them. Keep into the crowd. Once the Holy Father appears on the balcony, watch the pilgrims like a gull watching the sea. If a man isn't peering up at the Pope, is looking in any another direction, he's likely a Book or, less likely, but it does happen from time to time, an Italian who's come into the square on a Book's behalf. Approach him. Stand nearby. Don't say anything. Just listen. For two minutes—"It's a long time, much longer than you think, Blon"—take things in. Then, and only then, if you feel he's a prospect, go and fetch the Contessa without delay.

"Say if I can't see her?"

"In that case, find Johnny or Enzo."

"Say if I can't see them?"

Derry sighs into his hands.

If she really can't see them but feels the man might be a Book, ask him quietly, in English, "Are you here for the Choir?" If he doesn't think she's a streetwalker, and if he nods or indicates yes, she's to make her way over to the postern gate by the bridge. If he's a Book, the man will follow.

"As you go, don't ask him questions. Don't answer any you're asked. Never engage in unnecessary conversation with a Book until after the debrief is completed. Even then, always conduct yourself with three things which I don't think come altogether easy to you, Blon: tact, manners, suspicion."

"Who does the debrief?"

"That would be me."

"I'd say you're a skilled debriefer," she says archly. "And Jo would say the same."

"Eleven years around soldiers and that's a quip I've never, ever heard, Blon. Stunningly original and replete with comic irony. Take it to the saucy postcard factory. And grow up."

Saviour, bless and protect the three men from the attic if they are in the world this day. Forgive and take them close to thee if they are not. Hold close to thee in mercy the souls of the Ardeatine Caves. May the faithful departed rest in peace evermore including my husband Paolo Landini and our child.

In the thronged, hot square, she sends Blon to the Maderno fountain, often a good vantage point to watch from. You can pretend to be looking into it, or cooling your face with a handkerchief, or waiting for a date, or praying. If you stand behind the spray, the Germans can't make out your face.

"Oh, and sprinkle a little of this scent on your cuffs and collar, Blon. It will help. Let me soak a handkerchief for you to hold to your nose when you need to."

"What is it?"

"Limewater with salvia and tarragon. I concoct it myself."

The smell in the square, lately bad, today is almost visible. For weeks, Romans have been sleeping rough beneath the shelter of the colonnades, believing St. Peter's won't be bombed, or because they've nowhere else to go. Shacks. Shanties. Tents made of tablecloths. Cardboard boxes, slung tarpaulins, meagre campfires in buckets. Stews boiled from snared seagulls and rodents and cats. Fifteen hundred people. No toilet.

The weekly appearance of the Holy Father has coaxed tens of thousands more into the square. Blon wonders how there can be so many pilgrims during wartime. But perhaps war is why they are here, they are praying for its end. As though God doesn't have enough to do.

A remark of her mother's.

Wonder how she is today.

You'd miss her.

The old bag.

Wonder how is Daddy.

Miss him too.

The German conscripts guarding the boundary look disconsolate and bored, waving the people through, scarcely bothering to check papers, every sentry thinner than the scrawny comrades alongside him. But they don't look comradely, she never sees them banter or exchange quips. Often, as she glances, they seem resentful of each other. Their Sergeant has boils on his neck like cargo-lorry wheel nuts. A loudspeaker mounted on an armoured car is playing a husky, insidious song, over and over, too loud.

"Aus dem stillen Raume
Aus der Erde Grund,
Hebt mich wie im Traume

Dein verliebter Mund.
Wie einst Lili Marleen."

Around her the sunbaked and put-upon pilgrims, the army of the Lenten overcharged. Many women. Priests. Children off school. Queuing in a long line that is as straight as a line ever becomes in Italy, assailed by the never-ending hawkers. The doors of the basilica will be opened at eleven. There's good money to be made before then.

Buy my candles, my beads, my holy pictures of the saints. Blessed by a Cardinal. Blessed by the Pope. Cheaper out here than inside. Buy a ticket for the Capella Sistina, buy a better place in the queue. Anyone need a guidebook? Cheap today.

A section of the crowd starts singing in Latin; the hymn is taken up by the section alongside them and the antiphon soars and falters, echoing on the high walls.

She glimpses May, a hundred metres across the square, leading four Books towards the little bridge beside the basilica steps. One Book is limping heavily, May helping him along. Another has his arm in a sling.

Wild cheers. Paternosters. Bursts of Alleluias. The long window on a high floor of the residence is opened by two nuns, and the vermilion banner bearing the papal insignia is unfurled like a vast tongue. Something is said over a loudhailer, but she can't make out the words because the people, in frenzied applause, are singing the rosary.

Hundreds of the poor from under the colonnades hurry out from the shadow, join the pilgrims in supplication, holding up empty plates and hungry babies.

"*Ora pro nobis. Viva il Papa. Aiutaci.*"

Like a portrait of himself, the white-clad Pontiff materialises in the window, now nodding with a sternness that seems strange to her as he blesses the throng. The two nuns bring him a microphone on a stand, but it doesn't seem to be working; he continues speaking anyway, hands now raised, fingertips heavenward.

Many in the congregation kneel; some are overcome by tears.

Three men in shabby suits remain standing.

She sees exhaustion, fear, their stares of battered hope. As she approaches, they meet her eyes.

It isn't necessary to utter the coded question, she nods towards the postern bridge and sets out. They follow, in ripped mackinaw jackets and mismatched shoes with broken soles. She can hear one of them weeping with what must be relief and she longs for him to stop. Vital not to draw attention.

She sees the Contessa, in a sweat, near the colonnade's shadow.

May, moving swiftly through the throng.

He falls into step before the escapees, leads them raggedly over the bridge, sends her a brisk thumbs-up without looking.

Initiated, she returns to the crowd.

What happens next is strange.

Three men staring at her through the throng. One is smiling.

Derry looks up from his notes.

"That was all the man said, Blon?"

"Yep. 'For the Contessa.' And he gave me this."

On the front flap of the matchbook, a saxophone in silhouette; on the reverse, in curlicued italic black-and-gold lettering:

Hotel Benedetti & Beniamino's Bar
145 Via Bianchi, Roma
Cold beer. Hot blues
Stop by for an American cocktail

"But what did he look like?" Derry asks.

"Five seven, I'd say. Dark complexion. Shaggy hair."

"Colour of eyes."

"Not sure."

"Accent?"

"Couldn't place it."

"It's vital that you try to think, Blon," Derry says firmly.

"I *am*," she says. "I'm after telling you."

"Take us through it again. From moment one. You're standing by the fountain."

"I'm standing by the fountain. Doing my best to look about, like Jo told me. Bloody seagulls all around and they squawking like buggery. I've a headache you wouldn't wish on Himmler."

"And?"

"And suddenly, I spot three fellas who I think might be Books. Only, now I see they're laughing, and when I go closer, I hear they're Eyeties. One of them tries to pick me up. '*Bella, bellissima.*' You know how they go on. I ignore him, head back to the fountain."

"What then?"

"I open a pack of cigarettes, take one out. This chap of around forty walks out from the crowd with a lighted match. Overcoat. Homburg. Needs a haircut. 'May I?' It's as easy to get a light from him as to tell him to push off, so I accept it, see he's dirty fingernails, and he tips his hat, and hands me the matchbook. 'For the Countess.'"

"Earlier, you told us he said 'Contessa.' Not Countess."

She sighs. "I can't be precise."

"Precision is vital, Blon."

"So you've mentioned. Several times."

"Remember it in future."

"Thanks, teacher. Next question."

"Where did he go then?"

"Back into the crowd."

"You didn't see where?"

"There were fifty thousand people, how the blazes would you expect me to see *where*? Up his own arse for all I know."

"This is a most unsatisfactory debrief, Blon."

"Go debrief your fat head."

Derry passes the matchbook to Osborne, who examines it, then passes it to May, who holds it up to the daylight, squinting hard, then tosses it back to Derry.

"Beniamino's Bar," Derry says, using the matchbook to light a cigarette of his own. "We need to put out a feeler or two on what sort of establishment this is. Who owns it, type of clientele. Why they'd want to involve us."

"I know it," May says. "Been down Benjy's a dozen times. Playing blues jams, this and that. Or on the pull."

"What stamp of place?"

"Bit lively."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning what do you think, mate? It's a jazz club."

"Girls?"

"Yes, please. If one's available."

Angelucci gives a bleak laugh.

"What I mean is, is it a dance hall?" Derry says. "Or a cathouse? Clue me in."

"It ain't the type of place they put a mint on your pillow."

"Be a little more specific if you can possibly bear it."

"Sort of establishment you'll have been to on weekend leave in Soho now and again, shouldn't wonder."

"Speak for yourself."

"Always do, mate. Working-class habit, you'll find."

"So?"

"So, dancing if you want it. The odd magic cigarette. Maybe a tart or two, a card game. All fair, fine, and friendly. Worst grub in Italy and never enough of it. But cheery, you know? Free and easy. Good lark. Rooms upstairs if you like, though I never heard of anyone kipping overnight. Kind of hotel where they knock on the door once an hour and shout, 'Time's up, Luigi.' I thought it got closed as it happens. Last September, October. Heard it got hit in an air raid. Couple of doodlebugs through the ceiling. Seven punters kyboshed, bad for business, I expect. Haven't a bog who's the owner, never met him."

"Fascist?"

"Couldn't say."

"You're not being much help."

"Do apologise, old thing. One was usually off one's tits."

Derry ignores it. Blon chuckles. May deadpans like a mannequin. His ability to ape Derry's accent with such subtlety that Derry barely notices is one of his tonics for the troops. Now he picks up his saxophone, inserts a new reed in the mouthpiece, whistling a Coleman Hawkins number through the beads of his teeth.

“Well, it’s almost time for luncheon, or as near as won’t matter,” Osborne says, attempting cheerfulness. “Anyone care for a beaker full of the warm South?”

Derry has gone to the table, is scrutinising his model of Rome. Moving around candle stubs, reinserting thumbtacks. Readjusting the Tiber, which seems to alter course every day. Now he takes out his book of graph paper, searches through its pages.

“Jo,” he says quietly. “I feel a darkwalk coming on.”

The smoke cloud moves in the room.

24

TUESDAY 28TH MARCH 1944
16.18 HOURS

Dusk.

Distant sirens.
Red-and-gold light.

The ruined Hotel Benedetti.

A Billie Holiday portrait on the cloakroom wall is peeling. Weeds have split apart the bandstand where Rome's bluesmen bopped and bantered. Rotting leatherette banquettes. Scorched treble-clef patterned wallpaper. A burst snare drum and its brushes in a rusted, broken trashcan near the emptiness a baby grand used to reign from.

The perfect sphere of sea-blue mould on the spiderwebbed white plate was at one time a hamburger sandwich.

A phantom looking out through the filthy windows of what was once the cocktail bar and nightclub, an L-shaped dusty room that feels as though it should be down stairs, but is up them, near the entrance to the lift shaft someone once died by stepping into, would see a gloomy line of tenement houses all condemned by the mayoralty when excavation for the Metro damaged their foundations.

At street level, some of the houses once contained little businesses—a bakery, a tobacconist's, a printer's, a laundry—but their proprietors have long fled to less dangerous neighbourhoods with the poor they once lived among and below.

Behind the hotel, a muddy and silted stretch of the Tiber; in front, a desolate street so strewn with rubble that no wheeled vehicle could negotiate it. Looters have crowbarred pipework and sinks from the tenements but, for some reason, have not yet taken all the booty away. The southern end of Via Bianchi is barricaded by a barbed-wire cheval-defrise erected by the Germans following reports of a partisan band operating from the area, the northern by a cement-block wall put up by prisoners of war at gunpoint.

"Uncommonly salubrious location for an hotel," Derry murmurs.

"One imagines the rates are reasonable," Jo agrees.

"Bloody lot of windows, above us, every side you look. We'd be easily seen. Too vulnerable."

"I say we go in, Sam."

"I say we don't. It's a trap."

"How can you tell?"

"Soldier's instinct."

Gulls have nested on the windowsills. Knotweed sprouts from cracks in the plasterwork. Letters have fallen out of the hotel's broken fluorescent sign. The "B" lies smashed on the pavement before them, with fragments of a diaphanously clad neon hostess that used to blink on and off, high-kicking, cancanning, from nightfall to dawn, once the marvel of Via Bianchi.

"Someone's coming," Derry says.

"Stand close to me."

He does.

The agreed disguise is that they are a courting couple with nowhere to go.

"Put your arm around me, Sam. Touch my hair. Come closer."

The pulse of his neck through his ragged linen scarf. He smells of aftershave and tiredness and carbolic and cleanness. Their fingers intertwine. She hears his breath.

The passer-by is an old duffer with a dog on a string. As he passes, he doesn't notice them, clucks lovingly at the dog. Derry does not step away. His eyelashes against her lips. The feel of his stubble on her face. Minutes pass with no words. A tug hoots lugubriously from the river.

"This isn't entirely unpleasant," he says quietly.

"No, it isn't." Touching his wrists.

"I'd like to tell you something," he whispers. "When I usen't to say your name, there was a reason."

"I know."

"To me, you were you. Not a name."

"I know."

"Silly, I suppose. I'd say to myself, she's so beautiful and so admirable, and so brave, there must be someone. So keep off the grass. Is there someone?"

"There was."

"Your husband."

"Paolo, yes."

"Dreadful thing to have happened. I'm sorry."

"Is there someone for you, Sam?"

"Back in England."

"I'm so glad."

"She's a schoolteacher."

"Is she beautiful?"

"More than I deserve."

"Now I'm jealous."

"Jo—"

"I'm not free, Sam. It's too soon. If I were—"

"Well, that's something."

"It's been lovely being your girlfriend for six and a half minutes."

"And you didn't even kiss me," he says. "Rather chaste love affair we make."

"I don't suppose one kiss would break anyone's heart."

"For operational reasons," he says.

"Rude not to," she replies.

They step into the darkest recess of the doorway. Moonlight on broken glass.

Six and a half minutes become seven.

"That wasn't entirely unpleasant," she says then.

His laugh when it comes is quiet.

"I shall have to go in, Sam. Keep watch."

"No chance. You owl."

"How I love your endearments. *Andiamo*."

They are moving through the wrecked lobby, past its bricked-up doorways and concierge's lectern, by the battered-in hulk of what was once the reception desk where a thousand rubber cheques were bounced down the years. He moves with speed and stealth, boots avoiding jags of smashed mirror, as she creeps ahead of him to the staircase from which many stairs are missing.

He signals her for silence, fingertip to mouth.

Jabs his pistol towards the ceiling.

Footsteps.

Someone moving in the room upstairs.

Coughing.

A sneeze.

He gestures her to step in behind the grandfather clock near the sofa. Takes aim at the stairhead. Waits.

Two minutes, three. No one appears. Four minutes is a long time to hold a heavy pistol in one hand. As he moves to swap grips, a sudden clench around his throat from behind, and a knee in the small of his back. He struggles, sees her grabbed by a man in a gas mask, she fights, throws a punch.

"On the floor," says the voice behind him. "Twitch one muscle, you're dead."

"Let him go, Moon," says Weldrick, releasing the Contessa. "Take it easy. He's on the level."

"Moody," Derry says, as Moody removes the gas mask. "How very pleasant to catch up. Thanks for breaking my neck."

"What's buzzin', cousin. I guess yous got the matchbook."

"Guess we did."

"How'd you get here?"

"Never mind."

"Whole neighbourhood is crawling with Jerries."

"So we saw on the way."

"Now you're here, let me show yous around."

LETTER WRITTEN IN CODE
BY SAM DERRY THAT NIGHT

Hugh, I am sorry to disturb you, but I need your advice urgently. Enzo and I called to your room at the Collegium Germanicum but the porter said you had gone out.

This evening I visited the premises we spoke about, a derelict hotel, with Jo. We went by darkwalk but it took too long and proved in its own way too dangerous. Different route and means will need to be found if going there again.

Following initial misunderstanding we conversed with two of the three occupants, Moody and Weldrick.

Told us what happened.

Gestapo raided the repair shop and arrested its proprietor. Goons did not notice the attic because its door disguised as ceiling panel.

Fearing proprietor would betray them under questioning, M and W stole a vehicle, a hearse in for repair, from the premises and escaped, taking the Pole, who was unconscious, with them. They drove to a back street near the Hotel Benedetti, which Moody told me he had happened upon during his night rambles. There they swapped the hearse with a petty criminal and currency forger, name unknown, to be scrapped for spare parts. In return he gave them a little bread, pasta, beetroots, medicine.

Turned out that the victuals, whilst appreciated, were not needed. When Moody and Weldrick smashed down the door of a very deep basement in the HB, they found ten dozen boxes of canned goods: tinned figs, tuna, pears, onions, artichokes, potatoes, with crates of bottled olives, jars of olive oil and vinegar, boxes of salted cod, and three sacks of milled rice. Such a large quantity—Jo and I were taken to see it—suggests that these stores were panic-bought on Jerry invasion of Rome last September. Fresh water on site. Much wine, beer, also spirits. Blankets, sheets, pillows, et cetera. Several functioning bathrooms and lavatories. Pool table. Not quite the Taj Mahal but something of an improvement on recent kips. As Moody said to me, "The Moon lands on his feet. Like a cat."

M and W told me that housewives of the neighbourhood, coaxed or hired by the availability of food, come onto the premises to nurse, clean and shave the Polish airman—whose name, it seems, is Bruno. He is quartered in an upstairs room used back in the 1910s as a bridal suite and more latterly by certain of the hotel's patrons and their professional lady companions for periods of twenty minutes. He is catatonic or semi-conscious, I'm not sure what the phrase is. M and W told me his condition has deteriorated, was perhaps worsened by moving him but they felt they had no choice.

I'm extremely concerned by this situation from a security point of view. The man is on the face if it very poorly and worsening, I am no expert but suspect gangrenous infection of wounds. Jo, who as you know has some Red Cross training, concurs. I took a fresh set of photographs. Can you think of a doctor or surgeon who might at least look at them? A grave cause for alarm is that Moody by his own admission—he is proud of this, in fact—has made contact with other Books in the neighbourhood and has been inviting them to visit the Hotel Benedetti, in fact hosting gatherings of sometimes up to six or eight at a time, the men calling this loose organisation "Club Moonlight." There have been "talks" for which he has run up "invitations" on a Gestetner printing machine found in the hotel back-office. He cheerfully gave me a copy of his latest opus. Therefrom, some highlights of Club Moonlight's doings, for your delectation:

"On Tuesday next, First Sergeant Frank Jones, Co. A, 81st Reconnaissance Bn, 1st Armored Division, will speak on the Life Insurance business, which he works in back in Schaumburg, Illinois. Refreshments provided. Also strippers."

"Sunday evening, Captain Tristan Harper, 2nd Btn Nth Staffordshire Regt, Assistant Professor of Archaeology, Peterhouse College Cambridge, will lecture on 'Ancient Roman Architecture—with field trip.'"

"Back by popular request! Thursday will see the return of a Club Moonlight favourite: Private Jimmy "the Smoke" Buckley, Red Hook, Brooklyn, Co. C, 18th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry division, will repeat his amusing talk on 'My interesting anecdotes and experiences as a New York City Cabbie.' Admission: four cigarettes. Early booking (and strong stomachs!) advised."

What is occurring at the Hotel Benedetti has the alarming and real potential to become, in effect, a parallel Escape Line, a renegade organisation run without efficiency, security, or the slightest thought to individual or collective safety. I should add that, in addition to all the above concerns, friend Moody has somehow acquired a stolen Jerry sub-machine gun and about four thousand rounds. He is at the best of times a drinker who would suck the whisky off a sore leg, and a hothead whom even Weldrick, whilst liking him, more than slightly mistrusts.

The situation is completely unacceptable and must be brought to a halt.

Not to mention that, for all I know, the unknown and very ill man upstairs may deteriorate further. Certainly, there is no reason to think he will recover or even survive. Given that no Book under our protection has died, it seems to me essential that we would keep a clean score sheet on this matter, or morale throughout the entire Book community would be shattered.

Moving him to a hospital (and which one?) would be bloody difficult and dangerous, for him and for us and for anyone else involved. But keeping him where he is seems an untenable proposition. It is not agreeable to be checkmated

but I'm not sure what to do. Is there something I am missing? Jo says there must be.

I await your thoughts and, if you feel so inclined, your prayers. Usually, I wouldn't ask for them. I do now.

By the way, I have looked into the question of what became of the automobile repair shop proprietor following his arrest by the Gestapo. I understand from a contact that he died under interrogation, the details of which I cannot bear to tell you. The brave man gave up no names.

"I don't like the look of his left hand," Derry says, passing around the photographs. "Seen similar wounds before. Could need amputation."

"Ease down the gears, mate," John May replies. "A sodding amputation can't be done in a knocking-shop bunkroom."

"Happens in battle all the time. Ever read a history of the American Civil War?"

"Yes, I perused it in bed with your mum."

"With respect, Sam," Osborne says, "who would perform it?"

"Could one of us learn?"

"You having a fucking laugh, mate?" says May through a gulp of cigarette smoke. "Learn to saw off a hand? I can barely use cutlery."

"Maybe it won't need sawing off."

"Ten to one says it does. Have another butcher's at the photo. His thumb's like a puked-up pizza."

On his model of Rome, Derry has marked Via Bianchi with a length of red ribbon. The meeting around the table is proving snappy and tense. No answer has come from the Monsignor.

"Permission to address the chair," Blon says.

Derry gives a weary nod.

"I may have an idea."

He looks at her apprehensively.

A year ago, she says, her parents invited her to join a party they were taking to the opera, including the Monacan ambassador and his wife. The wife was ill; her place was taken by their son, Pierre. Shortly afterwards, Blon started going about a bit with him.

"Daddy called him a waster. I'm not saying he was wrong."

Pierre's sister Manon is a medical student at the university, her tutor and dissertation supervisor is Guido Moretti, the specialist in orthopaedics. A brilliant surgeon with war experience in Abyssinia and two honorary degrees from the United States, he only narrowly missed being appointed to the endowed Chair of Surgery.

"For God's sake," Derry sighs.

"Get off the kid's back," says May. "Listen up for once in your life."

"Please continue, Blon," Osborne says. "Without interruption."

"If we could get a message to Professor Moretti, he might be sympathetic."

"Why would you think that a reasonable possibility?" Derry says.

She shrugs. "Manon says he makes jokes at the Fascists' expense during lectures, even when he's leading a dissection. Calling Mussolini a buffoon. Imitating his voice. In the Cinema Quirinetta she once saw him refusing to stand for the Fascist anthem."

"Half of Rome doesn't stand for the anthem, the other half does," Derry says. "Then the following night they change sides. It's called—what is the word for it? Let me think. Oh yes—being Italian."

"But, Sam—"

"Jokes are bloody easy, Blon. I've heard Fascists make jokes against themselves. It's a way of demonstrating to the world what a wonderfully fine fellow you are. 'Look at my tremendous sense of humour.'"

"Ain't something you suffer from yourself, mate," May says.

"It's whispered around the university that he's secretly Communist," Blon continues. "People say it's why he didn't get the promotion to the Chair."

"Evidence, Blon?" says Osborne. "Other than tittle-tattle and hearsay?"

"You're not *thinking*," she says. "What would count as evidence? Being Communist in Rome could get you decapitated by the Gestapo tomorrow morning. He's hardly likely to mince up and down the lecture hall waving his hammer and sickle. Is he?"

"Blon," says Angelucci. "You know this Manon girl how good?"

"Good enough to know I can trust her to approach him."

"My dear Blonnie," Osborne says. "With respect and affection, you appear as though there is something you're not quite telling us. Is that correct?"

"I suppose so."

"May one ask what it is?"

"She thinks Moretti sort of likes her. If you know what I mean."

"Ah," Osborne sighs. "What I believe the young people term a case of Roman hands."

"And Russian fingers," May adds.

"It hasn't quite come to that," Blon says.

"Then, what?"

"Eye-contact during a lecture. Asking her to stay behind for a few minutes. Compliments on her dress. The usual bullshite."

"Just for clarity," Derry says, "you are of the view that we should ask this girl most of us have never met, to ask her professor we have never met—though he seems a sociable fellow when it comes to frisky remarks on one's frock—to visit this endangered safehouse and perform what may well turn out to be an operation on a bloke with something wrong with him but we don't know what it is? Why didn't I think of it myself."

"He's one of the finest surgeons in Italy. With extensive experience of war surgery."

"Honestly, how long is this nonsense going to continue?"

A thud as she tosses a hefty book on the table, where its frontispiece falls open.

Pratica e Tecniche Chirurgiche in Tempo di Guerra
Professore Guido P. Moretti, Milano e New York

"Sam, he wrote the textbook on forward surgery in battle. Translated into eleven languages. So don't talk to me like an idiot. It makes you look stupid."

"How would we do it?" Osborne asks.

"Do what?" Derry says.

"Get a message to this cove Moretti. I feel it's worth a discreet exploratory effort. Sam, any thoughts?

"Even if we could, Frank—and I've no notion of how to go about it—there's no guarantee whatsoever that his sympathies are pro-Allied. If they are—as I emphasise again, we have absolutely no hard evidence—why would he take the risk we should then be proposing? If caught, he'd be looking at a concentration camp. Or worse."

"I need to make a confession," Blon says. "I've already told Manon to ask him."

Derry chuckles. "Good joke."

"I'm not joking, Sam. I'm sorry. I was . . . acting on initiative."

"You're saying?"

"I told Manon to ask him if in theory he'd do an operation in a safe-house. In *theory*, is all I said. I didn't give details. She's seeing him this afternoon after a class at the university. His lectures are rare; they'd only be two or three a term. This afternoon's his last before Easter."

"But Blon, have you lost your mind? That information is totally confidential. Everything about the Choir must at all times remain—"

"*I bloody know, Sam*. All right? You told me already. You've told me *everything* already. You're like my mother on Benzedrine."

"So then, if you know?"

"I'm *sick* of the bloody Choir and the cloak and bloody dagger. Sick of being told what to do, what to say, who to speak to. When, where, why, who to avoid. Sick of this apartment. *Sick of it.* Utterly. Living like a child. Talked down to, all day long."

"Who in hell talks down to you?"

"You do, Sam Derry. To *all* of us, it's only me has the guts to tell you. Strutting about the place like a pantomime general, all you're lacking is the swagger stick and the half-ton of phony medals across your oh-so-manly chest."

May is gulping with laughter as he glances around the room.

The Contessa is not laughing.

She rises, goes to the cabinet in the alcove, unlocks it. Inside is a file of documents passed to the Choir by the double agent in Via Tasso, whose identity, by agreement, is a matter of secrecy. Her face is the colour of the sheet of paper she gazes at.

"What is it, my dear?" Osborne says. "You look troubled on a sudden."

"You had all better read this," she says, handing the document to Blon.

GESTAPO INTELLIGENCE REPORT

CONFIDENTIAL
ON PAIN OF DEATH

Subject: Professor Guido Pierpaolo Marco Moretti, surgeon.

Date of Birth: 11th March 1898; i.e. subject is aged 46.

Religion: Roman Catholic. Eldest brother is a priest in Palermo.

Place of Birth: Cannes, France, parents Roman, both opera singers. Was raised in Chelsea, London and in Civitavecchia, Lazio. Considers himself a Roman.

Education: Oriel College, Oxford; Royal College of Surgeons, London; Perelman School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania. Was keen undergraduate sportsman. Rowed for his Oxford college.

Address: Viale Giulio Cesare, Rome, 17. Apartment has been installed with listening devices. Telephone calls covertly recorded.

Marital Status: Married, Elena Maria, formerly secretary at medical publishing house, 1933. Marriage troubled. Two children, Tito, aged 8, Margareta, aged 10.

Subject's Occupation: Orthopaedic surgeon, professor of surgery University of Rome, visiting lecturer Universities of Milan,
Parma and London. Has published on battlefield surgery, musculoskeletal trauma, degenerative diseases, practised in Budapest, Ghent, Chicago, New York. Research sabbatical at Princeton University Medical College, autumn 1938.

Place of Work: Private clinic on ground floor of same building as apartment (see above). Expensive. Long waiting list. High-society patients. Lectures on orthopaedics and surgical anatomy at College of Medicine, University of Rome, and to students at St. Monica's Hospital.

Passport: Italian. Also holds Vatican Secretariat *carta di identità* in false name but with own photograph. (Subject speaks Italian, French, German, English, some Portuguese.)

Height: 2.01 metres.

Weight: 92 kilos approximately.

Eyes: Brown. Subject is long-sighted, wears spectacles.

Complexion: Typical Italian colouring.

Medical Condition: Records (photographs attached) indicate tendency to high blood pressure, otherwise reasonable health. Capable of withstanding severe interrogation should it become necessary.

Pursuits: Reads, attends opera, is qualified pilot. Keeps a speedboat at Ostia. Visits London tailor, Savile Row, twice yearly. Subject is an accomplished amateur painter of wildflowers and seascapes.

Political beliefs: At one time Leftist, Pro-American. Spoke against Fascism and Mussolini in 1937, discouraged Fascist students. On foot of intelligence about his personal life, gathered by surveillance of his bank transactions and other methods in November 1943, subject was confronted at workplace by Gestapo. Recently (January 1944) changed sympathies. Subject has been ordered to maintain university profile as Leftist, but in fact is now an agent of the Reich.

Information provided by subject has led directly to forty-seven arrests of anti-Reich elements, to deportation of at least a dozen Jews, and to nine executions.

Subject's Vulnerabilities: Paid for an abortion for one of his students in 1942.

Action: Subject to maintain contact with Commander Hauptmann on weekly basis. Is to supply 1) specific and 2) reliable information on anti-Reich activity among university student body, societies, clubs, sporting associations, and on faculty members, with names, addresses, dates, times, plans, conspiracies, collaborations. Failure of subject to comply will result in immediate divulgence of personal information to 1) his employers at the university, 2) his wife, 3) his students, 4) his parents, siblings, in-laws and neighbours, and 5) all major Rome newspapers.

Following which, subject will be publicly exposed as agent of the Reich.

Dropping the dossier, Blon runs from the room, followed by Derry's yells to come back. Down the stairs, out the door, into the yard. Now the Contessa is calling after her too, but Blon is not listening. Across the gravel, stumbling. Into the meadow behind St. Peter's.

Marianna de Vries appears before her on the footpath, bundles of foliage in her black-gloved hands, an oncoming dose of the Roman flu giving her a coughing fit through which she tries to smile but her face darkens as Blon approaches.

"Darling, what is wrong?"

"Marianna, I've done a terrible thing."

"Of course not."

"Jesus Christ—"

"Blon, stop, what is the matter?"

She keeps running.

In a corner of the rose garden, near the back wall, a dilapidated shed, bolt locked, but she wrenches the door with such fury that the rusted old padlock bursts apart. Hurrying in, she finds the bicycle, mounts it, totters away, tears streaming into her mouth.

Pedalling hard, standing up, head bent low over the handlebars, through the garden's winding footpath, over the footbridge, by the pond, through the ornamental gates, into the statue-filled expanse behind the basilica. An old Cardinal in a wheelchair turns and stares at the weeping young woman as she rides into the laneway alongside the long southern wall, onward, still crying, across the slick cobbles of the yard, where the Guardsmen hasten from their sentry boxes and wave for her to stop, but now she's into St. Peter's Square.

Through the pilgrims and photographers, the pedlars and pickpockets, past the fountains and the obelisk, the poor beneath their colonnade, and over the scarlet line marking the boundary with Rome. German soldiers open-mouthed. Fascist police windmilling their arms. A flock of nuns scurrying out of her way like black-wimpled seabirds, and onward she sails, into the noonday city.

Salt in her mouth.

Sweat in her eyes.

The hiss-and-zip of tyre rubber over ancient, straight street, and the whip of piss-scented wind in her face. She pictures Derry back at the apartment, in furious squabble with Jo. I-told-you-so's, pointings, bawled recriminations, someone sending for her parents and the Monsignor, the unendurable weight of his disappointment.

Where is the street she needs? Didn't she once see a signpost? Coasting, out of breath, she asks a passing mother with a baby, and the woman says left, then seven hundred metres up the first hill, past the Fontana dell'Acqua Paola, *but wait a minute, signorina, don't you know that you're not allowed—*

Onward, forcing harder. A missed pedal slices into her right calf. The pain is like a lightning bolt, up her leg, through her groin and abdomen, and again she wants to stop but she won't. She can *see* the university hospital

now, on the crest of the hill, as a teenaged German soldier steps into the street, aiming his pistol at her, carefully, his other hand aloft for her to halt.

"Identity card, miss?"

"I don't have one. I am a student at the university. My father is a diplomat."

"Again, *bitte*? I do not understand?"

"*Nicht mit mir. Ich bin Student an der Universität. Mein Vater ist Diplomat.*"

"Miss, where are you going?"

"To the hospital."

"You are ill?"

"I've cut myself. My lower leg. See."

"*Mein Gott*," he says quietly. "Take my handkerchief."

"I don't want your handkerchief, just let me on my way."

"Bicycles are forbidden in Rome."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"New bylaw, miss. Since a month ago. Partisans on bicycles were throwing grenades."

"I'm sick. I'm in pain. Get out of my way."

"But bicycles—"

She dismounts, flings it into his torso, continues quickly on foot. Half-expecting the call, even the bullet in the back, but there's nothing from the soldier, and she doesn't turn her head, because Derry says *never* turn, just keep walking, don't look, and if the soldier is kneeling now, taking aim at her head, she prays the shot kills her quickly, but she isn't going to turn, because enough has been destroyed today.

Never run, Derry added. She breaks into a trot. The oniony smell of sweat and the stinging smart in her calf, and she knows she is losing blood because the world is full of shadows and there's a globe made of salt in her mouth. A woman in a shop window looks confused, a little frightened, backs away. A man walking a dog steps into the street to let her pass, even tips his battered trilby as she does.

Through the gates of the university hospital. Past the mild, green cypresses, and the statue of Our Lady of the Forest. German jeeps and armoured cars, a Panzer near the junction. A signpost onto which a dozen painted pointers have been mounted, in the shape of pointing hands. Cardiology. Oncology. Radiology. Obstetrics. Her breath coming hard. What to do? Where to go?

A young doctor smoking in a doorway toes out his cigarette and approaches. "*Signorina*, permit me to help? You are injured."

"A scratch. I am late for a lecture on anatomy. With Moretti."

"He's a stickler, but there's no need to kill yourself. Let me get a nurse."

"You don't understand. If I'm late I'll be expelled."

"That building's the one you want, the old refectory, the dissection theatre is in the basement."

Running at the building as though running could knock it over. Past the students in the lobby, the flirtations and jokes and shouts. Down the dark steep stairs. Through the doors.

Ranks of mahogany pews, yellow lamplight from the dais.

In bloodied whites, Moretti looks up, scalpels glinting, from the opened torso. Metal dishes on a trolley. A masked surgery-nurse holding forceps. Heads turn slowly towards the gasping invader.

"Might we assist you, *signorina*?" says Moretti. "We are not tremendously busy here. As you see."

"Professor, I apologise for this interruption—"

"Have you come to donate your body? From what I can see of it, I am sure we'd be most grateful."

"I need to see a friend of mine for a moment. Manon Gastaud. There she is, in the front row. It is urgent."

"So one gathers."

Nervous laughs in the theatre. Even the surgery-nurse is chuckling.

"*Allora*," Moretti says, with an eyebrows-raised glower. "We must not stand in the way of friendship. Not even for science. Miss Gastaud, you may step outside and commune with your breathless associate on this matter of international importance."

"Sincerest apologies, *Professore*," says Manon Gastaud confusedly. "I shall be no longer than two minutes, I promise."

Moretti nods towards the cadaver.

"Don't rush. He can wait."

26

THURSDAY 30TH MARCH 1944
03.00 HOURS

Contessa?"

She is aware of being trailed as she crosses Via Veneto. His call comes again. She ignores it.

Stopping to look in the low, paned windows of an antiquarian bookstore on Piazza Fiume—Goethe, Dante, Mary Shelley, Lord Byron—there is a change in the rainy light, and Hauptmann is beside her.

"Did you not hear me call to you, Contessa?"

His reflection long and slim in the gold-lettered glass. Silent. Smoking. Slightly too close.

She walks on. He follows. Boot-steps on wet pavement.

By the jeweller's where her wedding ring was purchased. Past San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane.

She glances behind. He has vanished.

Where did he go?

Now in front of her.

Motionless by a lamp post outside San Pietro in Vincoli.

His face oddly white.

Long black leather coat.

She pushes onward, boarding a streetcar. He sees but doesn't follow.

Scrupulously, with a jeweller's attentiveness, he winds his antique wristwatch and steps into the streetcar's path.

A wail of grinding brakes, the driver roars, "*Togliti di mezzo!*" Get out of the way.

Bells clang, women scream, but he doesn't move, doesn't flinch, now turns to her, doesn't blink, doesn't smile.

Takes a candle from his tunic pocket, strikes a match against his thumbnail as the tram judders closer. An inch from his chest, it rocks to a halt. He slinks towards the maw of an alley.

Shakes out the match. Spits on the pavement.

Performs the sign of the cross in mid-air.

"Jo. Wake up. Are you having a bad dream?"

Marianna is shaking her, lighted candle in hand.

"Dear God."

"It's all right, Jo. I am here."

"What time is it?"

"Three."

"In the morning?"

"Yes."

"How long was I asleep?"

"I don't know. I was out on Rendimento."

"Marianna? You look frightened."

"Darling, I need you to dress quickly. Something urgent has come up. See you outside in five minutes. I must go."

"Jo?" the Monsignor shouts from the corridor. "Hurry on."

She washes at the basin, pulls on trousers and a shirt. Pain throbs behind her eyes, a dull, steady ache, and no aspirin in the apartment so she'll need to push through.

The first thing she sees as she enters the sitting room is the newcomer among the group.

A woman, early twenties, auburn hair, green eyes. Smoking as she stares at the little collection of Etruscan pots and gods that Osborne has put together from his visits to the flea market at Porta Portese.

Derry stands, back to the table, looking at the floor. Johnny May, mandolin in lap, by the window with Angelucci. Marianna and the Monsignor on the sofa, he with spectacles in hand. Exhausted-looking Blon

beside the interloper.

"Jo," O'Flaherty says. "I want you to listen carefully. This is Manon Gastaud, a friend of Blon's. *Mademoiselle*, this is Giovanna Landini."

"What is going on, Blon?"

"Manon is here to help us."

"In what way?"

"May I speak a word?" the young woman asks, voice hesitant and quiet, with a heavy francophone accent and slight hoarseness as though she is recovering from a cold.

"You may not," says Sam Derry. "I have told you already, *mademoiselle*. We must assume that this room has been planted with microphones."

"I can say in French what I need."

"The Gestapo has translators."

"Sam," the Monsignor murmurs. "The girl's doing her best."

Derry nods. "Sorry, all. Bit tired. Take two."

"Put on the gramophone, will you, Enzo," O'Flaherty continues. Gesturing for the group to gather in close.

A crackle, and the overture to *Rigoletto* fills the sitting room as they cluster around Manon Gastaud, who looks uneasy at their sudden proximity. The Monsignor nods for her to speak, places a finger to his lips to command low volume.

"Blon has told me of the man in hiding," she whispers. "I made her to tell me. It is not the fault of Blon. She ask of my professor of surgery, in some way I found strange. She try to tell me little. I make her to tell me all."

"Go on," O'Flaherty says.

"Moretti is the finest surgeon in all of Italy, maybe more. A brilliant teacher. Perfectionist. Very harsh. I am in my third year of studies with him."

"Manon," Jo says. "For reasons we can't tell you, we cannot ask Moretti."

"Of course. So, if the man in hiding need an operation." She shrugs. "I can do."

"I don't wish to be rude," Derry says. "Forgive me if I am—but have you ever performed an operation, *mademoiselle*?

"I know how to do."

"Have you actually performed one?"

"Not yet."

"Do you know my name?"

"You are Major Derry."

"The names of others in this room?

"Some."

"Forget every single name. You were never here. You don't know us. Don't know anything of how you got here, which building, what floor."

"I understand." She nods. "Already I forgot."

"It would have been very much better had Blon not brought you here. Do you understand, *mademoiselle*?"

"Blon did not invite. I insist."

"Have you discussed the matter with anyone?"

"Apart from Blon, no."

"With Moretti? Your parents? A boyfriend?

"With no one."

"That seems odd if I may so. Why not?"

She seems thrown by the question.

"My plan was to speak of it with Moretti after our lecture today. To speak with him of the man, to ask if Moretti will make a visit. But Blon, she come suddenly, tell me not to speak of it with Moretti. So, I do not. We are friends. *C'est tout.* As to my parents, we are not friends in this moment. Every day we fight."

"How would the operation be performed?" the Contessa asks. "In theory. Talk us through."

"From what I have been told, the patient suffer physical and mental shock. This cause numbness, disassociation, speechlessness, exhaustion. Fogginess of his mind. Confusion. So, he must be approach with great calm. I understand there is no theatre or dressing station for the procedure to take place in."

"Correct."

She shrugs. "So, surgical spirit for the instruments and surgeon's hands, tincture of iodine for the patient's skin. I can get. Then Dettol or Lysol for gloves, bowls, and soiled linen. Acriflavine for washing out wounds. Vaseline gauze, boric lotion, clean scrubs, something like a new mackintosh. Hot water. Linen as new as we can get it. Good light. There will of course be a nurse?"

"Very probably not."

"An assistant?"

"There are two escaped Allied servicemen sheltering with him," O'Flaherty says.

"Hugh," Derry says, "you are giving information."

"So one of those," she says. "If he is a soldier, he have seen injury. I can tell him what to do. I receive ninety-one per cent for my most recent examinations. In cranial, maxillo-facial, thoracic, and orthopaedic surgery."

"Problem is, he needs a hundred per cent of his thumb amputated," says Derry.

"Perhaps," she says. "Perhaps not."

"What does that mean?"

"I have examine the photographs and they are of use but not much. It is of course difficult to be definitive regarding any procedure before the surgeon see the wound. It is also unintelligent. Obviously."

"What would you use as anaesthetic?" Derry asks.

"There was surgery long before there was anaesthetic. The Greeks, the Egyptians. Otherwise, the species can not survive." She pauses, accepting a cigarette from Angelucci. "Even the English."

"Is that supposed to be a joke?

"You think Tenerife was a joke? Where they amputate Nelson's arm?"

"Trafalgar, *mademoiselle*."

"Tenerife. I write my thesis on it."

"I stand corrected."

"Not expert but I know a little. Having written a dissertation on this matter for my studies with Professor Moretti. He insist on a case history."

"I should like to read your dissertation, *mademoiselle*, but at a less strained time. The knowledge acquired during study can be a little distant from realities. The work we do is close to the ground."

She takes a long drag, mashes the cigarette out in the saucer doing duty as ashtray before speaking.

"*Bien*, the squadron of Nelson include *Theseus*, *Zealous*, and *Culloden*, smaller vessels and three frigates, four hundred guns and four thousand marines. Nelson, on the jetty, is struck in the right arm—" she holds hers up —"above the elbow—" she clasps it—"by a musket ball which explode. The humerus shatter, the brachial artery bleed. Nisbet, the stepson of Nelson, tie a stocking about the wound. Which save the Admiral's life. He is taken to the *Theseus*, where in great pain and with only three functioning limbs he climb on board, unassisted. Surgeons Eshelby and Remonier say he never complain beneath the saw, only that the metal is cold. And this is why surgical instruments in your Royal Navy are always warmed before use. He receive three doses of laudanum and experience the typical side effects of disorientation and constipation."

"Funny, I experience those listening to Derry," May says.

"A branch of the median nerve is include in the arterial ligature," she continues. "Bad news. But one year later, in August 1798, he gain a remarkable victory in Aboukir Bay—the Battle of the Nile. He receive a splinter in the head. Anything else you wish to know?"

"You've read a history book," Derry says. "It's an interest of mine, too. That doesn't mean I should be able to deal with a sick, frightened man as his surgeon. Surely you can see my point, *mademoiselle*. Even getting the place sterile enough would be an immense difficulty."

"The bacteria carried into a wound belong to one of three categories, these being: the chance entrants without *significato patogeno*—pathogenic significance. Then the *aerobi piogeni* and *aerobi portatori di spore*. The pyogenic aerobes, and the spore-bearing aerobes. If you wish to speak of applied bacteriology."

"Derry won a merit badge for that in the Cub Scouts," May says. "Didn't you, Sam?"

Everyone is quiet. The record skips.

Blon crosses to the gramophone, puts on another 78, which clicks as it slides down the spindle. Years later, some now listening will remember this moment. Some will never forget.

Across the city, a wounded airman, in an agony the whisky isn't numbing any more. Here in the room, opera, then the bells for the approach of first light. In a basement on Via Tasso, Paul Hauptmann approaches a bound prisoner, offering one last chance to speak.

"Manon, we need a little time to discuss matters," O'Flaherty says. "Perhaps you would take a bit of fresh air in the garden. With Blon. *Merci sincèrement pour vos conseils.*"

"Of course."

"I shall go too," Jo says. "I could do with some air."

Derry has moved to the window and is looking down at the elms. "How would you explain away your absence from home?" he asks. "To your parents. The man would need care afterwards. The person performing this operation might be gone several days."

"The man may not require an operation, I insist. Diagnosis is unreliable without seeing the wounds."

"If he does."

"I could say to my parents that I go on retreat. In the Vatican."

"They'd buy it?"

"Or say I visit Blon. They approve of Blon."

"Who doesn't."

"As I said, *mademoiselle*," O'Flaherty repeats, "you might give us half an hour. This is all somewhat sudden, as I know you will understand. Can I say how touched and grateful we are that you would offer to help us."

"Extremely," Derry says. "I hope I've not been offensive."

"You have been fair, Major. *Merci*. I wish well to your work."

Gathering her headscarf and duffel coat from a chair back. Enzo tosses her the keys she's been looking for. Derry opens the door. There is something she's reluctant to say.

"A favour, Monsignor?" she asks quietly. "No matter your decision?

"What is that?"

"I am nervous to request."

"No need."

"I am not very religious."

"Neither are many good and brave people."

She nods, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear, and he notices that there are tears in her eyes, and she notices him noticing.

"My life is to be a surgeon," she says. "If I die in one week, if I live a hundred years. *Je suis chirurgienne.* I ask the blessing of God on these hands."

Holding them out, she goes to kneel.

He refuses to let her.

Rain beats on the windows. Derry bows his head. The Latin words of the blessing, the air of Puccini.

"*Merci bien*," she says. "God bless you, Monsignor."

"*Que Dieu vous bénisse, Manon Gastaud. Mon héroïne*."

MARIANNA DE VRIES
NOVEMBER 1962
Written statement in lieu of an interview

I remember and will never forget Manon Gastaud. Many who knew her will feel the same way.

Close to dawn following the night when we met her, there was a heavy and prolonged air raid, which prevented her returning home. She managed to reach her father by telephone at the embassy.

He agreed she should remain with us in safety. It was not only a matter of the bombing. Manon's mother had fallen ill with Roman flu the previous evening. It was not in fact highly contagious but was very widely feared to be at the time. Manon should not come home until the weekend.

We became friends, at least I like to think so, during the brief time she stayed with us in Osborne's apartment. I say "friends" but perhaps that is putting it a little too strongly. Manon could be distant, could sometimes disappear into her thoughts. There are fortunate people who fit their life like a violin fits its case. It seemed to me that Manon was not one of those.

Culturally and in her conception of herself, Manon was as utterly French as her mother, but she was a citizen of neutral Monaco like her father. She was bright, a careful reader, with an exceptional knowledge of classic literature. Manon had that oddly rare quality in good readers, an exact memory for plot. *Wuthering Heights*, in Italian *Cime Tempestose*, a novel everyone feels they know but can never quite remember, she knew as another person knows a tram route. She adored Verlaine and Rimbaud, and the Bloomsbury writers. In another situation, I felt, Manon would have taken a humanities degree, but she was determined on medicine, her plan being to practise as a surgeon in Africa or China. Not many women entered her field at this time. For one so young, she was a very complete person.

I gathered that the parents were unhappy together. Marital unhappiness is transmitted to children by a sort of osmosis. There was an elder brother, but she rarely spoke of him, and two younger sisters who boarded at what she told me was the strict Catholic convent school she had attended herself in Nice but as a daygirl.

In another city, Manon would have been considered a beauty, but this was *la bella Roma*, where the humans are even lovelier than Botticelli painted them and have that essential component of charisma, physical confidence. "*Sprezzatura*" is the art of making difficult things look easy. Not many of us had that at twenty-two, as Manon hadn't. But almost all young people are attractive if approached without prejudgement, for it is the heart and mind that see first, not the cornea.

Looking at Manon, one saw a reticent, freckled face, chestnut hair that she had enjoyed growing past

shoulder length and wore loose—in the convent school, that had been forbidden—and the pools of those unforgettably clear and green, perceptive eyes from which it was difficult to turn. She had the expressive movement of hands that is part of daily speech in Italy, as many Monégasques have; the Ligurians are their neighbours.

Manon was tall, perhaps a little more than she would have chosen to be, and wore make-up, not skilfully. Before studying surgery at Rome, for a year she had attended the École de Médecine of the Sorbonne. There was a love affair with an older boy. It had ended badly. Occasionally you heard her whistle an exquisitely beautiful but very simple melody, the kind of music that makes even an atheist such as I doubt unbelief. One night she shyly sang it at John May's request, Johnny improvising a mandolin accompaniment in his gentle, tactful, brotherly way. It was "Waft her, Angels, through the skies" from Handel's oratorio *Jephtha*. Blon, who was in the room with us, had never heard Manon sing and was amazed.

Every time down the intervening years when I have heard that piece of unearthly music, Manon Gastaud has walked across the meadowlands of memory like a heartache.

Manon was with us for a few strange nights while discussions on the Rendimento to attend to the wounded airman suffered a sort of crippling paralysis. Some wanted desperately to send Manon home, to somehow find an experienced surgeon. There was talk that a courageous doctor, Lenart, a Jew, himself in hiding, but we did not know where, might be located and persuaded on board. He had operated on Derry the previous December, thereby saving his life, but seemed to have vanished; all trails to him were dry. Others felt that the time to press ahead was now. Others again—and I was one of them—found themselves simply not knowing what to say. Manon was a fiercely impressive person, but this was real life, not a university laboratory. To place her in such appalling danger was not tempting.

Great and specific difficulties would attend any mission to assist the airman. Troops had been seen around Via Bianchi in recent days. Since the massacre at the caves, Derry's "darkwalk" approach had become almost impossible—the Romans feared opening their doors to us. A Rendimento such as this would require what the Italians call *sfumatura*, a shade or smokescreen: a set of diversionary tactics. Usually those would be done in the form of bogus telephone calls to the Gestapo, reporting fake sightings of escapees or strange lights in derelict buildings, but the telephone at the apartment, being traceable, was unsuitable for that purpose: in any case was often cut off. We had no other. In addition, the rumoured intensification of bombing raids over those few nights would be an insurmountable hurdle. No safe mission could take place during an air assault.

Generally, in the Choir, we acted by consensus. It was exhausting, but we talked things out. "Like living in sodding Switzerland," Johnny May used to sigh. "Or the bleeding Quakers." Here he wasn't entirely wrong. There was always the feeling that a vote should be avoided since any vote alienates the minority. But, if consensus couldn't be reached, we would vote.

For a couple of days, we didn't. We looked the other way.

We needed to put things down. Take stock. Get a breath. There were at the same time other Rendimenti to be planned and carried out; the burden we were under was exhausting.

I go further: some of us came close to hoping that the airman would die. At least—horrid to say—that would be an end to the matter.

As often happens, "Wait and See" became the unsatisfactory situation—one couldn't truthfully call it a decision. Conditions were spartan; a bed of overcoats on the floor of the room I shared with Jo and Blon. But oddly, I think Manon enjoyed our strange cloister. Tension seemed to fall from her. She slept well.

In the mornings, she and I played table tennis in the garden before anyone got up. I was a very early riser in those days. So was Manon. Peace might be found in the hour after dawn, even in the clack of the ball, the repetition, the relieving pointlessness. Lacking a table, I am sorry to say that we had to make do. Our playing surface was the stone casket of an early medieval Cardinal.

At that time, a surprising number of young people lived in the Vatican, some in refuge from persecution, others because the war meant they had nowhere else to go or no safe means of getting there. Seminarians, war orphans, runaways, German deserters, the children of Vatican employees. To this ragtag band may be added several dozen teenaged boys or youths in their early twenties who had left the priesthood but been unable to return to their home places. Some eked out a living by doing odd jobs at the radio station or in the gardens, or, if presentable, as ticket-takers in the Musei Vaticani. Basic food was provided for them by the kitchen nuns, who enjoyed pretending to disapprove of them. They slept wherever they might, gave a bit of enjoyable cheek, and added a certain liveliness to a place that was, as may be imagined, not always lively.

Particularly when the Pope had left his Kremlin and gone to the country residence at Castel Gandolfo for a weekend, the younglings would come out to play. Irish boys among them disported themselves at hurling—a sort of hockey with violence—and at what I was told is entitled "the Long Puck", a contest in which hurlers compete to drive a ball the furthest distance while bellowing and belittling the foe. Monsignor Ugo, as I called Hugh, stormed down to them one evening, irked by the ruckus that had interrupted his Lenten prayers, and

vengefully sticked their ball over the high castellated walls and into Rome, an achievement that received their riotous applause, to his chagrin. Amused, he told me later that he had spotted Manon and Blon among the puckers.

Manon had great goodness. She had many other traits, too, but goodness was *primus inter pares*.

She was one of those whom, if you ask for a river, try to add its tributaries without you seeing. I noticed her missing meals. Leaving cigarettes unsmoked so that others could have them. There was something almost infuriating about her selflessness. She and Blon seemed to quarrel often, as sisters and sisterly friends will. At other times, like sisters, they were half of each other: Manon would finish Blon's sentence; Blon would hold up Manon's hair while Manon put in an earring.

The story of our Roman Escape Line has been characterised as a tale of courage. But it was always a story of friendship, first and last. The friends we knew and those we did not, some fleetingly encountered, others never at all. I am no sentimentalist, but I call it a love story.

I met insanely brave people during the war in Rome. None was braver than Manon Gastaud.

She scrutinises Derry's photographs, over and over, goes for hours to the Vatican Library from where she returns with armfuls of tomes on surgery.

But the volumes are too old and outmoded to be of even the slightest use.

The etchings are dignified, the calligraphy elegant, the bindings and spines studded with gemstones of the East, but there are bones in the body no one knew about or had names for back then.

No scholar knew what to call those nerves, muscles, sinews. Those tissues drawn like celestial systems.

Valves, chambers, tunnels, cavities, ducts, canals, declivities.

The eyeball is a planet.

The brain, a bursting sun.

The lungs, living trees.

The womb, a world of waters.

The ear, a hammer and anvil.

The stomach, a labyrinth.

The body is a constellation no explorer has ever completed knowing, or ever will.

On one page, the Latin words *Globus Respirans* and the chronicler's drawing of a godlike face inside a globe. The medieval vision of a diving helmet.

In the thousands of millions of days since they began to walk the Earth, not one of Manon's species has ever set foot on the deepest floor of the sea.

Only seven miles down.

On land, a distance walkable in a morning.

A Swiss Guardsman sees her roaming the papal gardens alone. Smoking. Pacing. Counting on her fingers.

Craving the comets.

Not knowing the sea.

By the gate to the narrow laneway leading to the belvedere at the rear of the basilica, three figures are standing in the fog.

"Look, I like and admire the girl," Derry says. "But the situation wants halting. She needs to go home. We'll think on."

"One more day," Jo asks.

He shakes his head. "I'm opposed."

"There is no other option morally but to try our best to save him."

"We can't afford morals."

"Then we are the same as the Nazis."

"Christ almighty, Jo. You call me a Nazi?"

"Sam, I could never—"

"I've been in combat. Do you hear? I've sent men out to die and kill. Some of them boys, Jo. Half my age, little more. I am not in the mood to endure your debating society pontifications."

"Endure them or not, that man shall be saved. If I need to lose my own life in the attempt, so be it."

"You won't bloody lose *mine*, Jo. It isn't yours to lose."

"Lower your voices, the pair of you," O'Flaherty snaps. "This minute."

Silence descends. Cigarettes are lit.

"Stop accusing each other," he continues, "I'm warning you. Cut it out. If either of you starts blackguarding the other in my earshot again, I'm gone out of this godforsaken kip like snow off a rope, I swear on my people's graves."

Derry is staring at the ground, as though he has never seen gravel. The Contessa blows smoke rings of anger.

"It's bloody ashamed the pair of you should be," the Monsignor says. "Call yourselves leaders? Petulant schoolchildren, more like, wanting all your own way and refusing to see the good intentions of the other."

"That's too easy, Hugh," Derry says. "Ever hear what the road to hell is paved with?"

"That's a road I know too well, Sam. So do we all."

"Lot of balls, Hugh. Rhetoric. This isn't a pulpit. You're not in some bloody library making notes on Aquinas."

"Alas."

"Maybe you should stop preaching from on high and bloody get into a fight for once in your life."

"I like you, Sam," he says. "You're at heart a decent skin. Bit superior and arrogant like a lot of England's self-deluded, but you probably don't mean it. That's why I won't box the head off you for saying that."

"Enough," she cuts in. "Take the vote. It's why we're here."

A "yes" means they proceed with Manon in the team.

A "no" means they send her home tonight.

If it's "no," there is no plan. Some new solution must be contrived. Weldrick has been adamant that he will not leave the airman behind. Moody's posture is to mock Weldrick's insistence—"Livin' saint over here"—but it is clear that he shares it; he mocks everything he takes seriously. "No" will open paths unexplored.

Jo holds out her rosary beads purse, they each insert a scrap of paper. Already inside are the votes of Osborne, May, and Marianna. Unable to make up his mind, Angelucci abstained. Blon has been refused a vote and has opted not to push.

The anonymous ballot on the proposed mission comes out at three to three.

"Sam," Jo says. "As Officer Commanding, you have the tiebreak ballot."

"I don't want it. One of you can have it. I'm through."

"Whether you want it or not, Sam, that's what standing orders stipulate."

He refuses to meet her stare. Turns away, towards the roses.

"Then I'm sorry. My vote must be no."

"Sam, please. I have some further ideas to create a decoy," she says. "Things we haven't tried before."

"The decision is made," he says. "Manon goes home immediately. We keep seeking a properly qualified surgeon and talk about this again in a week. That's an end to it."

"He could be dead in a week."

"So could we *all*, if this bloody nonsense goes on."

She turns to leave but stops. The crunch of a man's footsteps approaching through the mist, which swirls as he disturbs it, his heavy body moving. Derry is glancing about but there is nowhere to flee to. As the figure appears before them, red-eyed and pale, wrapped in a dressing robe he's holding closed with one hand, they hear the troubling catch in his breath.

"Dear friends," says Osborne shakenly.

"Frank, what's wrong? You look frightened."

"I've received a tip-off that something bloody awkward is about to happen. Have you taken the vote? This might change it."

"Why so?" Derry asks. "Give me facts. Not maybes."

"If that airman remains where he is, the Gestapo will have him within a couple of days, perhaps hours."

"How can you know?"

Osborne beckons.

They approach.

He whispers.

27

MONDAY 3RD APRIL 1944
22.46 HOURS

At night, the Palazzo Landini is alive with sounds. Mice scamper in the walls. The wheeze and clank of old pipes. Wind sneers in the great chimneybreasts where birds have made their nests. The clocks seem louder, somehow.

When the sounds make it hard to sleep, he goes out to her tall-walled garden, hoping its peace will drown his fears. She feels close to him here—every garden is a portrait of its owner. Among her roses and narcissi, her oleanders and violets, the pollen that should be asleep drifts between myrtles and acanthus and speckles the marble of the statues. Box hedging in moonlight is lovely.

In Berlin he can't afford a garden, finds the allotment he and Elise have rented a great respite. The crocuses will be coming along. Summer will see poppies. With old planks he might build a treehouse for the children. Growing up so fast. Don't want to be with Daddy any more. He misses sandcastles and laughter. How painful it will be, to be away at Easter. Stuck in this shitpit of grave robbers.

He wonders if the Contessa supervised the planting of the pleached lemon trees and those lilies. Perhaps there was a gardener. Yet, this terrace seems feminine, somehow. At school he learned a poem by Goethe in which a garden was haunted, but when drunk, as now, he cannot remember poets' lines. They jumble and cackle, ungraspable.

Lately, on the telephone, Elise seems preoccupied, sullen. Reluctant to speak of anything but the children. The admonishing note she received about their son from the Hitler Youth troop leader: "An eleven-year-old boy should love the Führer more." Squabbles with classmates. Difficulties in school. Their daughter was uninvited from the fourteenth birthday party of a neighbour's child, is growing petulant, was caught in the school toilets with a boy. Her brother is wetting the bed.

Elise blames him for his absence, for the war itself. Whenever he tries to press—but how are *you*, my darling—there is silence down the line, or the rasp of a striking match and the inhalation as she sucks down the smoke.

Sometimes prisoners he has interrogated seem to lurk among the sequoias or plead through the jangle of the wind chimes. The mewl of a cat, the croak of a crow, raise discords he does not like.

Midges at his face. Bats in the lintels.

The branches of a dying elm can seem like outstretched fingers when you're drunk, in someone else's garden, far from home.

The trellis is a gibbet.

The lantern in that pine is a skull.

Night makes every garden a place of changelings.

Important to push away weakness. Too far along the road. Sometimes a man of peace must perform terrible duties, he tells himself. I had to do what I did, there was no other choice. For Christ's sake, my actions *saved* lives.

One day, it will be over.

For now, there must be redoubled efforts.

Make sure the people know what will happen if their defiance continues. Do not try to hide it. Flaunt it like a firework.

Say, "This will be done. Escapes shall be stopped. I should rather not resort to such violent and unGerman means, but the bandits assisting the enemy have forced my hand. I have my duty. You have my word."

Shock them.

Shuffle the cards.

Do the unexpected, always.

Tomorrow morning, six more Gestapo substations will be opened. Seven the day after. A dozen next week. Small and efficient, close to the ground, the officers put to live in the neighbourhoods, not sequestered in

barracks any more. The model no longer a hub, but a spiderweb, ever-reaching. A presence in every neighbourhood. No-go areas not tolerated. Bring the fight to the Choir's own back streets.

Inside, he quaffs a coffee, drenches his head at the kitchen sink. It doesn't sober him, but it crushes down the drunkenness. He goes to the map on her mahogany table, with a pencil and slide-rule finishes subdividing Rome into quadrants, eighths, sixteenths. It is careful, measured work of the sort he likes. Soon, the drink will wear off. These things can be willed. Focus on the chore, its physical requirements. Like every one-time draughtsman, he relishes the feel of a new pencil. Prati. Trastevere. Centro Storico. Tiburtina. Each segment the same size. He is scrupulous about exactitude. Daily, he tells his staff—if only they would listen—it costs nothing to get the details right.

The gramophone record he has put on sends its sibilance through the room. "*E lucevan le stelle.*" The tenor's lachrymose ecstasies. Shrieking strings. His hand is not yet steady—he needs to erase and remake a line—but soon he is on top of the task, as he knew he would be. Nineteenth district marked out; he comes to the twentieth: a stubby triangle of map that represents Vatican City.

No need to establish a Gestapo substation there. Plenty of sympathisers already.

"The Reich Has Many Eyes."

The slogan comes to him like a moth.

He will speak to the printer in the morning about artwork for the poster.

Elise.

He says the name.

Wonders why he is saying it.

Queer thing, to say your wife's name aloud, for no reason.

Last Sunday, during their call, he sensed a man in the bedroom with her—a cough, a chuckle. Strange sound. He pushes away the night-thoughts, which are worsened by whisky. Her long, lithe limbs, her ashen raw boyishness. It is hard to be beautiful, he has always imagined, a burden he is glad their daughter will never have to carry.

Their son's beauty will be a great burden and nothing more.

He stumbles to the telephone, waits for the line for Berlin to connect. As he does, his glance is taken by an object he has never noticed before, on the mantelpiece. A clear glass globe, the size of a grapefruit, like a fortune teller's crystal ball or some instrument used in the study of lenses or eyes. A light he can't see reddens it, refracts in the mirror behind, across the armoire and the bust of Empress Livia Drusilla.

No answer from Elise. He imagines the telephone tinkling through the silent apartment. Through the corridor and the kitchen and the empty rooms. Up and down the plain, dark staircase.

In some realm he sees her rising from the bed where their son was conceived, moonlight on her nakedness, on her lover asleep. Then her return, the sleeper waking. Kissing her shoulders, her back. The low moan passing from one mouth to the other. Her wrist to her forehead. Cries of pleasure.

The thought drives him from the room, and he finds himself in the garden again, with a sense that something unnameable in it has changed.

The sentry on duty salutes him.

"Good evening, sir. *Heil Hitler.*"

"Any reports of incidents in the city tonight?"

"No trouble, sir."

"Send out two round-up squads immediately. I left a list on my desk at headquarters this evening, of seven streets to be raided. All males between seventeen and forty to be arrested for questioning about escapees. Those capable of work to be deported."

"But, sir, as I say, the city is quiet."

"That is when we need to be worried. Do it."

"Yes, sir."

"Here is a list of every barricaded street in Rome. I want all of them opened. Tomorrow."

"Sir, that could take several days."

"By tomorrow at dusk."

"As you command."

"Every currently barricaded street to have a Gestapo substation installed by the weekend. No exceptions. Thank you, Sergeant. Bring around the motorcycle."

"You're going out, sir?"

"Apparently."

"Sir?"

"I would hardly need the fucking motorcycle if I weren't, man. Would I?"

"It is late, sir. If I may say so. And you seem—a little tired, sir."

"What are you, soldier? My wife?"

The box hedge scoffs in the cresting wind. The Empress on her plinth stares at nothing.

He motorcycles to the rendezvous with an asset called Andrin Müller, a Swiss Guardsman who has been found in bed with a priest and threatened that his fiancée back in Zurich will be told.

Müller is waiting in Via Purgatorio, an alleyway behind the Vatican frequented by night people. Pale in the drab grey khaki the Guardsmen wear when off-duty, so far from their daytime flamboyance. The envelope he hands over feels too thin, no information worth having.

A Bishop got drunk and stumbled on the Sistine Chapel steps. Father Ettore in the Vatican Library wears rouge.

"Anything further, Müller?

"Such as?"

"Ever see runaways, escaped Allied prisoners, in the Vatican?"

"Ever see stars in the sky?"

"Be specific."

"One rarely actually sees them; they stay hidden during the day. But everyone knows they're there. People joke about it, they nickname them 'the shades.'"

"In which exact locations?"

"The radio station, the outbuildings. Wine cellars. Potters' sheds. For a while, tents around the grounds, but not so often any more. In various people's private quarters. Some say beneath the basilica itself. In the *scavi.*"

"What are those?"

"Excavation tunnels used by the archaeologists."

"Anything further on the Contessa Landini? Movements, contacts, habits, routines?"

"To be honest, I rarely see her any more."

"To be honest?"

"As I said."

"Why not?"

"She keeps to herself. Some people say she's gone to San Casciano dei Bagni, where she has a summer house."

"Nonsense."

"I haven't seen her since the day after I left the letter from you on her bed."

"You've been given a chance, Müller. Don't waste it. Or else."

"How long more will this—whatever it is called—arrangement between us last?"

"As long as required."

"Only, some of the boys are beginning to suspect."

"Your problem, not mine."

"Is that so?"

From the air, Müller has pulled a knife, long and thick, a machete. Logic says it came from his tunic, but his movements are too quick for logic to lock onto. The hilt is studded metal, curved about his fist like a leaf, the scrolls and scrapwork are Libyan. His grip is steady and strong, as though taking tiny nicks out of the moonlight. Nodding, licking his upper lip, he drops his shoulder, feints, comes in with a sweep at the face. Hauptmann stumbles backwards, ducking, the oil-clean blade gives a low, whistling swoop as its wielder advances. Wiry, strong, unperturbed that he missed. Pressing, faking, a southpaw in the ring. Parries. Grunts. Skilful stabs.

"Don't do this," Hauptmann warns.

"Too late. Nazi scum."

"Kill me and I swear they'll shoot five hundred Romans in the morning."

"Worth it."

"Put that down, we can talk. Take it easy."

Eleven minutes later, Jo is at the war table with Derry and Osborne, sifting through the schedule for the false denunciations, but discord is threatening again. Derry wants ten calls, Osborne five. Where exactly should be telephoned? Gestapo headquarters? When?

She stands up from the squabble, goes to the water pitcher, pours a glass. A sudden sparkling faintness, an

eerie sense of sundering, as though her mind has not followed her body across the room or her doppelgänger is still seated in the chair. She has walked out of herself. It has happened before, started happening in her teens, returned with appalling force in the months after Paolo's death. Vital to stay calm. There isn't time to be ill. The intelligence that has come to Osborne—tomorrow the Gestapo will start opening substations on every barricaded street in Rome—means the entire complicated plan must be finalised before dawn.

Trying to gather herself, to stop the blurring, glancing out of the window, she sees what she thinks is a figure moving steadily through the pines. Something odd about the gait.

Moonlight shifts.

The figure is only a shadow.

A shadow pursued by a shadow, along the semicircular path by the papal garden, as though heading towards the curvilinear greenhouse.

Shutters all closed now. Quietness in the garden. By the ruins of the old gallery is the decrepit storehouse where the Choir rehearses, walls bearded with overgrown ivy, many-windowed. Leering gargoyles.

Somewhere in the distance, fox-bark.

Through the floorboards below her, she hears a woman talking in some language she doesn't recognise. A man answering in Latin. The hoot of a kettle. A radio playing Ellington, the owls in the laurels. The click of fernickety crickets.

Paolo, help me.

She closes her eyes.

Picturing something piglike nuzzling its way through the gable's blue shadow, scuttling close to the wall now, shoulder against brickwork, past the statue of the Virgin, past the hedges and briars, the hippocampus carved into the plasterwork. Through clay and wet pebbles, through nettles and thorns.

"Jo?" Derry says suddenly. "Are you unwell? You are shaking."

"Overtiredness," she mutters.

"Take a moment?"

Entering the women's lavatories on the second-floor corridor, she bends to the cracked sink, washes her hands and hot face. Fear of the Roman flu looms at her from the phantom in the mirror—these bouts of nausea and sleeplessness. Must make a tisane. Sage and wild garlic, cloves for the pain. The pulse in her left eye gives a fierce, insistent throb.

Pull yourself together. Say a prayer.

Crossing to the little window, she closes and locks it. All windows in the building must be closed and locked at night. Otherwise, the bats come in.

Again, the dread tries to possess her. Begins to settle on her like a weight. It is almost as though she can feel it pushing down on her shoulders like a demon pressing her into a quagmire.

Paolo, help me. I cannot do this any more. Are you there? I'm so frightened. Please, come to me, Paolo. Send a sign, give me anything. I live like a Book in a cramped, airless hovel. I jump at sudden birdsong. I suspect every sound. I skulk through dead sewers. I cannot continue. Where are you, Paolo? I despair.

Back in the apartment, at the table, she lights a cigarette, tries to concentrate on the notes. Derry in shirtsleeves looks fitful, long fingertips to his face. Osborne staring at the ceiling as though it would become invisible if he stared long enough.

Footsteps in the passageway outside—probably nothing. One of the elderly nuns.

Anyhow, the heavy door is locked.

A quietened cough from the passageway, like a cat hucking up a furball; Derry and Osborne haven't heard it, but she is certain.

She goes to the heavy door. Unlocks it.

Looks out.

No one is there.

Dust spiralling.

An ivy leaf flutters on the terracotta floor.

In the lintel of doorways, dust rising.

The corridor is swept twice daily—she does it herself. Vital to keep the dust down, she's worn out telling the others. Dust is how the Roman flu drifts and writhes through old buildings.

Dust is our enemy. It could kill us.

Fetching the broom from its cupboard, she starts sweeping.

More ivy.

Thirteen leaves in all, her count is assiduous.

Tomahawk-shaped. Laurel green. Spine of livid purple.

Paolo. I am a madwoman, counting leaves in the night. I must leave the Choir behind. Give me permission. And a map. I am mangled. Emptied. Spent. Used up. All I want is to sit in our house. See our laurels. Walk our rooms. I know it is low of me. I do know. I'm not noble. All I want is a glass of water that doesn't taste of dust.

At first light, she looks out and sees movement in the papal garden. A flit of silhouettes between bushes. Scores of men crossing lawns. Pushing out from waist-high grass near the *orti di guerra.*

The scarlet stars of cigarette tips.

But the men are only shadows. And the lights are only fireflies.

"Sam?"

"Jo?"

"What is happening to me?"

At dawn, the body of a Swiss Guard is found in Via Purgatorio, a disreputable alleyway not far from the Vatican. The deceased has been shot.

In a press statement issued at 09.01 A.M., Romans are warned by Gestapo Commander Hauptmann to be cautious. Do not frequent unsafe neighbourhoods late at night.

He adds that a programme has commenced this morning to reopen barricaded streets. The Reich will go anywhere and everywhere in the service of Mother Rome. Even as we ponder the tragic death of a young man with a bright future and a fiancée back in Zurich, Gestapo substations are being established in every neighbourhood of the city.

There may be one very near you. Be consoled.

May I avail of the opportunity to wish you and your family a contemplative, prayerful week, and a Happy Easter this coming weekend.

Your friend, Paul Hauptmann.

Heil Hitler.

On the morning of Spy Wednesday, Weldrick, watching from the window, sees the bulldozer of the demolition squad enter the street, blocks of smashed barricade bashed to the tarmacadam pavement.

Teams of soldiers enter the row of derelict buildings immediately across from the Hotel Benedetti, carrying in desks, typewriters, filing cabinets, fire extinguishers. So close to him that Weldrick can hear their conversation.

An hour later, a signboard of the German eagle is hung over the doorway of the former laundry that is now Gestapo substation 15, Via Bianchi.

Act IV
Club Moonlight

28

Page written in Sir D'Arcy Osborne's hand
on flyleaf torn from a novel.
Found among his papers after his death.

Planned Operation

1) Team of four to make their way in secret to Hotel Benedetti.
2) Team of four to enter hotel unobserved by enemy or public.
3) Airman to be medically assessed on site. Sedated by force if required.
4) Distraction events (include bogus telephone calls) to commence off site. From safe line yet to be found.
5) Airman to be treated and stabilised on site followed by rest period of minimum four hours. After which—
6) Due to proximity of new enemy installation (across the street) and consequent impossibility of post-operative medical attention, airman to be evacuated undercover, without further deterioration of his injuries or condition. Repeat: Essential that this and all steps of plan are unobserved by enemy or public.
7) Team of four plus two (total six) and airman to be smuggled to safety. Means of doing so yet to be found.

If any step of the above proves undeliverable, abort plan and retreat.
Risk of Operation: High
Degree of preparedness: Low

Time of dusk: 19.51
First light: 06.53

No practice run has been attempted due to danger, proximity of enemy and immovable approaching deadline. Very high flexibility required of backup team in event of enemy activity. Two of main team are inexperienced. Many unknowns.

Realistic chance of success: Best not thought about too much.

29

5TH APRIL 1944
SPY WEDNESDAY
20.00 HOURS

"Remember," Derry whispers, "there will be Nazis twenty metres from us, in the Gestapo substation across the street. Keep the talking to an absolute minimum. Good luck. Pray there isn't an air raid."

In the alley off Vicolo Gesualdo, Jo Landini sets her watch, takes a swig of brandy from Derry's hipflask. One last long pull of an American smoke. If this night is survived, she tells herself, she will swear off cigarettes. Lent will again be shouldered.

Derry spills talc on his hands, squats and wrenches open the manhole in seven twists, blaspheming it under his breath. She is first down the shaft, followed quickly by Manon and Blon, then by Derry, now silent, who pulls the cover back into place.

Torches on.

A sleek, fleeing rat.

Thigh-high in black water, they push steadily through the cobbled tunnel, single file, safety rope around their waists affixed to their belts. Soon the passageway thins to a narrowness that must be squeezed through, one by one. Thirty-seven yards north, at the tunnel's junction take the left, then north, then north-west, to the grating.

Through its bars, they see Weldrick in the tunnel, his bright, stressed face; already he has padlocked a length of chain to the lattice. Thumbs-ups, rapid nods. He pulls.

Derry heaving, curses. Echoes of their grunts, as the ironwork inches out of its rough, gritted frame, falling into the rushing water on Weldrick's side, and Manon already has her head into the gap, the others trying to push her body through from behind. Her medical bag in Derry's raised right hand, for it mustn't be allowed to get wet. Cars rumble on the street far above them.

"Don't breathe the dust," Manon warns.

But there isn't a choice.

"Hurry," Derry urges. "But quietly."

Onward, into the darkness, flickers of torchlight on stone. Quartz in the murk throwing glints. The tunnel takes a curve—heavy brickwork, medieval—and the camber is heading downwards into an oblong, half-collapsed vault, shored up with oaken buttresses seven centuries ago. They step from the creaming water onto a narrow granite shelf leading to St. Caspian's Stairs, a flight of ancient steps down to the Tiber.

A shallow, black flatboat is waiting.

Pushing out with the oars, but remaining near the bank, so close that they can hear the chatter of conversation from back rooms as they pass and the glum, sullen clucking of ducks. Five in this low vessel makes for a hefty, creaking load. Weldrick passes around a bag of charred corks; they begrime their faces and the backs of their hands. Rubbish in the rushes, empty bottles, dead birds, and a bicycle robbed of its wheels.

Strange light on a bridge's underside; above them a roadblock. They can hear the murmured German, see the midges in the searchlight.

Now ahead of them, a half-collapsed dock.

The flatboat groans with relief as they help one another onto land. Weldrick hooks it to a post that protrudes from the mud, lays the oars into the hull with delicacy and slowness as though they are made of glass.

In the days of the old smugglers, the stone lock-up on the jetty was a boathouse and armoury; now it stores rusted deckchairs and beer barrels for the Hotel Benedetti whose rear ground floor it abuts. A scuttle hole has been opened in its ceiling, there is a shaft of red light, through which a tangle of knotted rope has been dangled.

"Hurry," Jo urges, first into the climb.

Moody, up above, helping hand strong, hauling hard. Derry, Blon, and Manon pushing from below. The

Tiber's murmured echoes behind them. Now they're into the storage cellar of the Hotel Benedetti, racks of wine, piles of crates, a coffinlike object that must be an abandoned refrigerator draped in tarpaulin. Moody has brought towels and clothes—chefs' whites he found in the kitchens—does his best to help them dry themselves but the intimacy involved is too much, and he turns away, smoking, as Manon and Blon get out of their sodden trousers and shirts and Derry doesn't bother, just shakes himself like a dog. Jo swings her arms to drive away the fear and the cold.

Now hurried clattering stumbles up a wooden staircase without any banister, to a room that smells of carbolic and sepsis. One large window, draped with heavy blankets. Candles in bottles on a pool table.

The airman is lain almost diagonal on the double bed, eyes shut. A sputtering fire in the black iron grate. Linen tablecloths steaming in a cauldron on the hearth.

He looks so like Paolo that the resemblance startles and upsets her. Like seeing a living waxwork. In the quietness, she hears her breath.

"Jo," says Derry abruptly. "Concentrate. We need you."

She goes quickly from the room. Blon calls her name.

"Let her go, Blon," Derry snaps. "She'll be fine in a minute. Our work is here."

"See if you can turn him on his side," Manon says. "Very, *very* carefully."

Derry uncorks a jar of camphor and the hipflask, takes a brisk swig of the liquor, moistens two rags. Manon has gone to the steel stockpot in which water is boiling, hooks her hairband around her wrist, washes her hands up to the forearms, trying to make a lather of the stubbornly hard nugget of soap, now dons surgical gloves from her bag.

"Blon," she whispers. "Mop my forehead."

The airman groans and shifts, appears to be trying to sit up, now pleading, eyes wide with fear, and she tells him *niente parlare—dormire—capito*? But he doesn't understand. Manon shines a dynamo torch on the wound to the back of his neck, but Derry presses him down, holds the chloroformed rag to his nose, and the airman shudders a moment or two and listlessly kicks before stilling. Moody and Weldrick lie him back down.

Manon rooting in her bag. Derry drips whisky through the airman's teeth.

"*Mademoiselle*?" he asks.

"We can most save most of the hand," she tells Derry. "Not the thumb. We must amputate."

"All of it?"

"From base of proximal phalanx to distal metacarpal."

"Translation?"

"All of it."

"Christ."

"More troubling is the suppurated wound to the back of his neck."

"Bullet?"

"Or shrapnel. Bruising tells us the C1 vertebra at the summit of the spine has been damaged. I can feel something below the skin, between the oesophagus and spinal column. Forceps extraction will not work, the entry is too deep. In the neck we have dense cervical fascia, arterial haematoma is common during surgery. Also, cerebral complications. We have a dangerous situation. This man should never have been moved."

"Want a list of the shit shouldna happened in this world, doll?" Moody says bleakly. "We'll be here a long time, let me tell you."

"How long before he's fully out?" Derry asks.

She shakes her head. "We can't wait. He's in grave danger. We need to operate immediately."

"Otherwise?"

"Otherwise, he'll be paralysed. Or he'll die."

Thirty-two and a half miles south, a squadron of young men leave a long line of prefabricated huts and cross a makeshift, gravelled airstrip through the horizontal sheets of rain, pulling on steamed-up goggles, helmets in hand.

The death machines on the runway before them have been washed. On their throbbing, hot flanks, paintings of beauties in swimsuits. Slogans daubed on the bombs.

Propellors chop the air. Clenched fists are waved as the chocks are kicked away.

Twenty-seven of the forty pilots will not return.

An arc-light sweeps the runway.

Where in hell is his driver? Late, yet again.

What does it *take* for them do their duty?

On the pavement by the Palazzo Landini's gates, Hauptmann looks at his wristwatch.

Swimsuit in a rolled-up monogrammed towel under his arm, he paces, fumes, lights a cigarette he doesn't want. From the balcony opposite, a little girl is watching, in her hands a bald ragdoll sewn from an old sock and buttons. He ventures a wave, but she doesn't return it. A woman's voice calls to her from inside the apartment, but the child does not leave. Her look of freezing hatred. Stroking the doll's threadbare skull.

As the Mercedes rounds the corner, he beckons, irritated by its ponderous trundle over the cobbles, the *bamp* of its horn, irked by the flash of the headlights.

"Apologies, *mein Kommandant*," the driver says. "I was told there's an air raid coming."

"There is no air raid coming. Do you hear any siren?"

"Not yet, sir. But they said it was coming."

"Who said?"

"Sir, the intelligence desk."

"The most ironically named entity in Rome."

"Hotel Halcyon, sir?"

"Get a move on."

The heavy Merc three-point-turns. He allows thoughts of the pool to console him, its coolness and shadowed solitude, the weightlessness of being in water, but again he sees the child on the balcony across the street.

Her tight, dead smile. Dangling the doll by its neck.

He snatches down the blind. Tired of looking at the Romans. Their sullen scowls, ungrateful mutterings. Gestures at your back.

See how they bloody like it when they're ruled by the so-called Allies, sons of slavers and inebriates and cricket-loving perverts. They'll beg for the days when their junk shop of a city was run for them by the Germans. It is the thing that never fails to baffle him. These people don't mind losing. They'd *rather* lose, in fact. Winning would be too much work.

Damn them, enjoy your swim. But anxiety has seeded itself in the heavy, sleek car.

"Driver?"

"Sir?"

"When you drop me at the hotel, go to the police station and radio to headquarters on my behalf, would you."

"Message, sir?"

"Double the guard on the Palazzo Landini from tomorrow."

Beneath his breath Johnny May utters a word not often heard in the Vatican.

As though shocked, the lock in the studded mahogany door gives way to his lockpick. He beckons to the Monsignor, Osborne, and Angelucci, who enter the oak-panelled office of the Curia secretariat. May remains on watch in the portrait corridor outside.

The Ambassador uncradles the telephone and taps for a line.

During the seconds that pass, he reflects on the fact that Cardinal Ventucci, the owner of this vast mahogany desk, is an infamously bad-tempered, vengeful person who, if ever he finds out about this act of burglary and imposture, will respond in destructive ways. Only one thing worse than getting thrown to the lions. Getting thrown to the Christians.

The operator connects Osborne to the number he has requested.

Speaking in German, he begins hesitantly, attempting to mimic the anxiety of a frightened old man.

It isn't that much of a stretch.

"Gestapo headquarters? What a relief. This is the Papal Nuncio, Cardinal Ventucci, speaking. I should like to report suspicious activity near the Porta Pinciana. I have just now seen a group of heavily armed men, two dozen or so, stealing out from the monastery on Via Sicilia. Speaking English. One didn't like the look of them. Might you send a couple of cars? I had the impression they are escaped Allied prisoners."

At one of the two adjacent desks, Angelucci is on the line to the Fascist police. "Seven men, yes. Escaped British prisoners of war, caught in North Africa, I heard them converse not ten minutes ago whilst I was returning from the sickbed of a friend. They are heading towards Via Tasso with a truck full of dynamite. May I speak with Commander Hauptmann? Ventucci here, it is quite urgent, I assure you. I heard them say they

intend to assassinate the Commander."

On a call to the German central barracks near Tiburtina, O'Flaherty continues: "One of them bore a strong resemblance to the Irish priest. O'Flaherty. Lanky fellow—ruddy—rather unpleasant piece of work. I have just this minute gone by his rooms here in the Vatican, but I see that he is not there. The porter told me that he left an hour ago. Which I thought a little odd. My understanding was that the Monsignor is not permitted to leave the Vatican and enter Rome. It surprises me to know that he is at large in Tiburtina at this very moment. I felt Commander Hauptmann would want to know. That is correct, I am Cardinal Ventucci."

May, in the portrait corridor, wondering how he got here, is watched by the admonishing stares of the sad, stern apostles.

"Easy for you lot," he tells them. "Girl's blouses."

Bombers taxiing out.

Jouncing down the rutted runway.

Pines loom in purple fields. Low cumulous shifts westerly.

Wind speed of five knots is reported from the south-east, as the first three fighters begin ascending the air. Followed in neat succession, flying low, beneath radar, so close to the ground that the pilots can see haystacks and the rooftops of farmhouses, make out weathervanes on the tops of steeples.

Now climbing a hundred feet a minute, through cloaks of wisping mist, into the smokefall of a turquoise night. Above them, dirty stars. A broken fingernail of moon. Behind them, more fighters, in tidy threes and fours. Ahead, not a city but a set of quadrants on maps, a checkbox of targets to be struck.

Don't think about it. Watch your instruments. Altimeter, thermometer, fuel gauge. Air speed indicator, compass. Know where you're going and how you're coming back.

Jerry will be waiting. Dug into the hills.

Fly low. Hit hard. Make it count.

Show him no mercy. He showed none to London.

God speed. Be lucky. Hit hard.

"Goons outside," Weldrick hisses, beckoning Derry to the window.

Two Gestapo men, smoking, in front of the substation.

"Dead quiet, everyone," whispers Derry.

A clean double-folded sheet is spread out over the side table, on it the row of surgical instruments stolen from the Vatican infirmary by Angelucci and Johnny May.

Scalpels, wedges, pliers, saws. Rampley forceps, retractors, roll of suture.

Manon sorting them quickly, green eyes sharp above the boiled white neckerchief she is wearing as a mask.

"Open his clothes," she says quietly. "And clean him."

They do as she commands, his body limp as a salmon as they ease him out of the shirt and tattered long-johns, washing him with Lysol-soaked sponges, swabs of iodine, torn towels. His toenails long and gnarled, rags between them, bloodied. She waits. Blon is holding his left hand.

"More light," Manon says. "I cannot see what I am doing."

"That's all the light we have," Derry says. "It is absolutely imperative that we avoid getting seen by the goons across the street."

"I need more."

"Not possible."

"Don't give me 'impossible,' Major Derry, get it done."

Weldrick and Moody hang another blanket over the window. Blon places a log in the grate, throws a handful of sugar on the failing wisps of flame, a thing she used to see done by her grandmother back in Ireland, and the flame billows into high brightness. Manon gestures towards the art deco mirror on the wall behind the sideboard.

"Place it to the side of the hearth, and angle it," she says.

As the peach-tinged brightness doubles, Manon takes a length of strap from her bag, parts the patient's jaws, places the leather between them.

"Everyone, shine your torch on his neck."

She opens the textbook she has brought, places it atop a stack of guidebooks on the bedside locker. Turns to the chapter on neck wounds.

"Anyone who prays," she murmurs. "This would be a good time."

As the first incision is made, his whole torso gives a tremor. With the second long cut, he appears to be trying to turn over onto his right side, eyes opening momentarily before screwing back shut, as though he knows what is happening, but she assures them that he doesn't. He is out, it's just the body under assault, it knows what to do when attacked. Many of the so-called instincts are physical.

"Blon, mop my forehead. You others, hold him steady."

They try to, but it is difficult, he is again attempting to roll, the sinews in his throat and forearms thickening like cords with the effort, but in seconds the body that contains him is compelled to be still. Weldrick whispers that the Gestapo men across the street have made their way back inside the substation.

"Speak to him," Manon says. "There may be brief moments when he can hear us. Speak tenderly. As to a child. It cannot harm."

Nobody seems to want to do that—what would they say? Anyway, he would not understand—so she holds their gaze a final moment, pearls of sweat dripping from her eyebrows.

"One last thing," she says quietly. "Be prepared. He may die. It is not uncommon. Either way, you will see much blood."

They nod as she goes to work.

She wasn't lying.

For a moment, there is no sound but his troubled, phlegmy breathing, and Manon's whispered urgings to herself. He bites down on the strap, which appears to calm him, somehow. In the distance, an abrupt growl of the breeze, as though something obstinate and heavy in the air is being disturbed. Then, a gentler sound.

Hesitant at first, for she hasn't her mother's fine voice, but steadying, strengthening, knowing the truth is in the vowels, not the meaning. Eyes on the fireplace, Blon Kiernan sings, her hand on the fallen stranger's wrist.

"Lullay, lullay
My little tiny child
By-by, lullay, lullay.
Oh, sisters two
How may we do
For to preserve this day?
Then woe is me
Poor child for thee
And ever mourn and say
Lullay, lullay
My little tiny child
By-by, lullay, lullay."

Head low.

Swabbing the floor of the gentlemen's changing room in the basement at the Halcyon Hotel.

A stooped figure in mop-woman's overall and cap.

Through the little window that opens onto the front car park she hears Hauptmann's Mercedes arrive. Glances up through the cellar grating. There he is.

As he crosses the gravel sweep and enters through the lobby's revolving door, she is leaving by the rear fire exit, off the kitchens.

On his way through the lobby, Hauptmann is approached by the night clerk.

"Commander, good to have you with us again. Telephone. At the desk?"

"For me?"

"If you'll follow? I can put it through to a private kiosk?"

"Gestapo headquarters here, sir, an Allied bombing party is approaching."

"I can hear that, you fool."

"Intelligence says the raid will be confined to the southern outskirts; the city itself won't be attacked tonight."

"What else?"

"We're receiving an unusual number of sightings of prisoners at large in the city."

"How many calls?"

"Eleven in the last two hours, sir. We're logging them now."

"Read me one."

"A dozen men with English accents seen distributing ammunition in the Campo de' Fiori. Here's another, come in this minute: five American commandos armed with machine pistols, surfacing from the crypt beneath San Clemente. The British Ambassador, Osborne, is with them. What do you think, sir?"

"I think an attempt is being made to divert us. The question is from what."

"Shall I send you the logbook by motorcycle, sir?"

"Give it an hour. Then do."

In the changing cubicle, he picks up the piece of paper that has been placed beneath a sauna stone, on the bench.

A ticket for a private box at the concert hall, the 8.30 performance.

On its rear, brief lines in what he knows to be her handwriting.

I wish to speak with you in private.
Please come immediately. Unaccompanied if you can.
The performance will be in progress. Take your seat and wait.
I shall find you at the final curtain.

Giovanna Landini

Twenty-five and a half miles south of Rome, a thousand miles above the outskirts, the bombers look down on the lakes and ruined aqueducts, at the roads growing broader and longer and more plentiful until they converge into the grey river that is the main highway.

Mission proceeding to plan, reports the lead pilot over the radio. No sightings of enemy aircraft. We are taking no fire, repeat, no fire.

Target One in plain sight, estimating three and a half miles. Wind speed picking up. Darkness thickening.

Ahead of them, the haze of a city whose citizens refuse to blackout properly, the strange death-glow of Rome at nightfall. The light the same colour as the ochre and burnt sienna buildings. People walking through the luminescence to their homes.

Thinking about food. Where tomorrow's bread will come from.

Now hearing the scream from the sky.

The factory takes the first hit, seven ten-ton explosions. Flames the size of trucks belch from the collapsed roof of the central hangar, bits of cars spinning through the air like confetti.

Doubling back, the Spitfires strike again, at the office blocks and workshops, then the strips of workers' housing and the laboratories and warehouses, making craters of the assembly bays and the vast coils of steel, but by now a trio of Luftwaffe have appeared a hundred feet above them, guns spewing, the first plunging into a close-up attack, so the fighter pilots can see one another through the shattering globes of their cockpits, see the mouthings of curses and prayers.

Invocations are muttered and gasped, as the Tiber reflects the fury, rockets falling around its banks, into weedy, stony shallows, and a soup kitchen for the poor is magicked into dust with the seven Congolese nuns doing their best to run it, two of whom are literal sisters, who die arm in arm, and the twenty people waiting in line.

Where is she?

Probably watching.

Making sure he's alone.

Let her watch.

He will listen to the so-called music.

When the Führer comes to Rome in triumph, we will give him a concert to remember. None of this flabby Italian gibberish. Something taut.

Commandeer a train. The Orchestra of the Reich. It will make a good story for the newspapers. Build morale.

In her box, through her opera glasses, he looks out at the audience. A habit of his training at Gestapo Academy: put faces in your memory. Never know when you'll see them again.

That pallid cadaverous ghoul, isn't he Archbishop Corelli, whom the choirboys try to avoid?

The pretty teenage girl with her mother. Why is she not wearing the Fascist Youth insignia, as she should?

Who is that woman in the box opposite, in the pre-war Worth gown? Mournful-looking, sombre. Seen her

before. Where?

Three youths in tuxedoes too big for them—what are they doing here, they don't look like cognoscenti. Engage them in conversation if a moment presents itself later. Buy them a drink. Offer smokes. Be affable. Why are they not in the army? Nod and grin. Take their names.

A student whose ribs he broke last October is in the third row from the aisle. Make a note to bump into him on the staircase, the Communist little bastard will find it disconcerting. Ask how he is. Shake hands.

On the stage, the soprano performing Tosca clenches and unclenches her fingers, as Scarpia, the chief of police, attempts seduction yet again, as he's done thousands of times down the decades, always getting nowhere. You'd think he'd have learned by now. Violinists sawing miserably, the conductor looks bored. As with any orchestral finale in Italy, everything too loud, blasts of trumpets, warring horns, no subtlety. Christ, the kettledrummer appears to think he invented percussion, listen to that attention-seeking schoolboy bom-bom bombast. The vulgarity of it all. Little wonder one would concentrate on the audience, not the music.

Elise walks across his mind like a dusky minor chord. He loved attending concerts together in the early days of their courtship; he knew nothing of serious music, she educated him. Her hand resting in his; the darkness of the parterre. A book she gave him on Beethoven. Recital tickets she saved up for as his birthday present. When we marry, she told him, we shall have a good piano in our house. And every gramophone record we want. And happiness.

Where is she now? At this moment. With the children? The aroma of her hair, the chime-tree of her laughter. Her shoes in the hallway, side by side, back to front, at the foot of the long mirror her parents gave as a wedding present. A drawing crayoned by their son as a five-year-old in kindergarten, now framed in silver on the Bösendorfer piano she always wanted.

Happy Christmas, Daddy, my hero.

The audience, uneasy now. The conductor ploughing on. Woodwinders looking frightened, eye each other, dropping time. Something's wrong, he's not imagining it. Frantic hisses. Worried nudges. A cue for the oboist's solo is missed; the violas seem lost.

Restlessness running through them; he sees movements, conversations. The mother of the teenage girl is whispering to the dowager beside her. A man taps someone's shoulder in the row in front. Pallid Archbishop Corelli, left hand to his ear. The orchestra starting to stutter. Seats clacking as people stand up.

What is going on?

Where is she?

Has she played him?

The woman and her daughter stand, push their way down the row—the daughter has forgotten something, is gesturing towards their seats, but her mother won't let her go back, grabs her by the cuff, hauls her out, down the aisle. Murmurs becoming shouts. Shouts becoming cries.

Behind him the box's curtain is torn open so hard that it slips its hooks. The elderly doorman looks scared.

"Sir, you need to leave—"

"What is wrong?"

"Sir, an air raid. Can't you hear? We must evacuate immediately."

Scrambling down the staircase, pushing audience members and ushers out of the way. On the street outside the theatre, a carpet of shattered glass and the noxious stench of burning.

The statue of Marcus Aurelius now headless.

A dead carthorse.

Upturned trucks.

From the hills, the blattering of ack-acks.

Soldiers swearing and roaring as the sky booms with light. Someone screams that the Allied bombers are turning, coming back.

For a moment he is unable to move.

His driver grabs him by the wrist, hauls him down the side street by the stage door, the Merc's engine is running but it has been attacked. Smashed windows, battered doors, splatters of scarlet paint—"NAZIFASCIST MURDERERS"—but he clambers in and is soon inching through the fiery streets while fleeing people bang on the windscreen for help—he hopes it's for help—but don't get it. The engine grinds: "Something wrong with the gearbox," shrills the driver. "The clutch is failing, sir."

"It won't fail."

"But the smoke, sir, can't you smell it?"

"Keep going."

From the doorways ahead, women with picks, daggers, chains. Ten women, maybe a dozen. Coming forward through the light.

"Driver, go," he roars.

“Via Tasso?”
“Of course not, you bloody fool, we’ll be a target. To the Palazzo.”
A brick is hurled hard at the unbreakable windscreen, which shatters like a spiderweb in a nightmare.

30

ELEVEN MINUTES LATER

In Via Landini, the pillars outside the Palazzo have been splashed with red, white and green graffiti—"DEATH TO THE TYRANTS"—and cartoon hammer-and-sickles. An effort has been made to scrub the defacements away, but the paint has been dirtily smeared and the words are still legible. Unlocking the creaky side gate he enters the garden, gravel crisping beneath his boots.

As usual, handfuls of filth have been flung over the high, battlemented wall in his absence—bags of human waste, a couple of rotten, powdery oranges. Let them fling what they wish, it doesn't bother him much. Good for them to have the illusion that protest matters. Essential to gorge the conquered on that pabulum.

The consolation of high walls and tall ageless trees, like entering the grounds of a monastery. The fountain's soothing gurgle, the aroma of the pines near the well. Shadows shift between the elms as though the anxious birdsong is producing them. The high ancient belltower that once must have seemed stern but now is a benevolent old observer of all things passing, as all things will.

Even this filthy war will pass.

Looking up, he sees a bomber turn heavily towards the south and he wonders why it hasn't yet unloaded. Dying flare-light glints the windows of the Palazzo's ground floor. A candle seems to move between rooms, as though someone inside is processing between them—but it is only the reflection of the fireflies.

The clucking, low sound behind him is a peahen, nothing more.

He turns the key in the stiffly resistant front door lock.

The hallway long and empty.

Blue moonlight.

Motes of dust.

The armless, marble Venus on her black onyx plinth.

Eggshell eyes of the foremothers watch from the alcoves.

An odd smell—garlic?

But it couldn't be that.

In gems set into the floor, the Landini family motto: *Spectare Cursum Vespertinum.* Watch the course of the Evening Star.

On the wall beside the garderobe, her renaissance crucifixion. Spanish, heavily bloody, dripping spears, grasping fingers. Torturers mock and leer as they gamble for Christ's clothes. Skulls in the sand. Jailers' fists clench whips. The crown of thorns like a globe of barbed wire.

Who could live with such an image in the house? Good she doesn't have children.

Around the hallway, at first-floor height, a minstrels' gallery he has scarcely bothered looking at before, lutes mounted on the walls, faded tapestries of grinning harlequins in motley. Something odd about the way the moonlight is catching the silver and gold threads, as you move across the hall, over the black and white tiles, past the upended oaken sarcophagus that is the grandfather clock. Past an orb of pale glass in its stand.

Swords crossed over the mantelpiece.

A stag's antlers.

Heads of boars.

Her *Madonna with Child and Lilies* before him, delicate and calm. Possibly by Gentileschi, claims the catalogue in the study, but it lacks a signature, could be the work of an assistant. The Führer would love it. Make a note to send tomorrow. A cattle train will depart Tiburtina in the morning at eleven, bringing prisoners to Poland, but will stop for refuelling at some godforsaken hole along the way, where a connection to Munich might be possible. Such fine, controlled brushwork, the subtlety of colour. The triangular construction tactfully softened by the sleeves of the virgin's cloak and the glow from the baby's halo. Often it has occurred to him—certain people *do* have a halo, an aura. Elise, for example. How she enters a room. That is what the painters were trying to show, the radiance of the subject. An everyday wonder. It is why we have art, he feels. To show us what is there.

Jolting up through the floors in the creaking pneumatic elevator, he peers out through the cagework at the doors of rooms he has yet to enter, at the dustsheet-draped statues and urns of long-dead flowers. He alights at the fourth, clanks the gate closed behind him. The long corridor is stacked with files and packets, his records from the prison. He unlocks and enters the library, pours himself a tumbler of her amaretto.

A skittering, brisk pitter. Something scuttles.

The door on its heavy spring closes creakingly behind him. But that is what it is designed to do, there is nothing to fear. It is a tired old house. Don't be fanciful.

The skittering comes again, some living thing moving. He stills. Turns. A clawlike click on tiled floor.

The heavy brocade curtain behind the piano gives a twitch so infinitesimal that most men wouldn't notice it. But he is trained to notice the small things.

He reaches into his holster, cocks his pistol.

"Who is there?"

No answer.

The sound of breathing behind the long curtain. Unmistakable. Steady.

"Step out," he says cooly, "with your hands above your head."

Nothing moves.

Weapon in hand, he approaches, pulls back the drape.

A vixen, heavily pregnant. Eyes scarlet in moonlight. Cowering in the corner where the skirting board is broken, and the semicircle of mousetraps have long been sprung.

"Poor thing," he says gently. "You gave Daddy a fright."

She slinks from his beckoning hand.

Re-holstering, he hunkers.

She has mange and is suffering, perhaps is close to labour. How did she get in? No matter. A draughty old palazzo has entrances known only to nature. Loose slates. Missing duckboards. Holes gnawed through cracked plaster. Old houses need mouths to let them breathe.

"We shall get you a little saucer of milk," he tells her. "Don't worry, poor darling. Daddy's going to take a shower but will return."

She stares at him, bewildered, slinks hard against the wall. Watching the strange sight that is his outstretched, gloved hand. Now observing him walk from the room she has chosen to give birth in. Why is he here? Who is he?

He moves along the landings, through pillars of dust. Framed maps. Venetian vases. Etruscan heads.

Above him, the attics of the Palazzo Landini. Below him, the innumerable cellars he knows must be there but hasn't bothered to find. An image comes to him of the men hiding deep beneath St. Peter's, clambering through the tunnels, squeezing alone through damp vaults. What must that be like? Never to see day?

He enters the dressing room off her boudoir.

The table has been set.

Which is odd.

He didn't set it.

Now he sees it's set for two.

Entering, she nods with a casual but not unkind abruptness, as though she is accustomed to seeing him in her house. In her hands, a silver tray on which a serving platter and cruet have been placed, with a champagne flute containing a sprig of rosemary.

"I have made something to eat before we have our talk," she says. "I hope you don't mind. I was hungry."

Words won't come to him.

"Actually," she continues, "I don't care whether you mind or not. You have taken plenty of my wine. I have taken some of your food. Call it payment if you wish. You are hardly in a position to object. One doesn't see good steak and fresh vegetables in Rome any more. Won't you be seated?"

She nods to indicate the chair.

"It's a simple *cacio e pepe* to start," she says quietly, setting down the tray. "We Romans argue like furies about the recipe, as you know. You didn't have *pecorino* in the house so we shall make do with *parmigiano*. Shall I serve?"

He says nothing.

"I was brought up with manners," she says coldly. "I do not eat while someone sits staring at me."

He nods briskly towards his plate. She forks out the food.

"I have done the steaks rare with a mushroom sauce that was a favourite of my mother," she says. "Oh, perhaps you'd pop to the cellar and select us a bottle of something? You certainly know your way there. The '32 Amarone is exceptional."

"I prefer to remain here," he says.

"*Va bene.* There's a '29 Barolo on the sideboard behind you that wants drinking up. Would you do the honours?"

Handing him a corkscrew.

"Opening wine is a man's task, I always feel, don't you? One of the things your sex does better."

"Is that so?"

"Commander, I ask that I am permitted to do this in my own way. Is that possible?"

"Do what in your own way?"

"I do not wish to abase myself. If I am shown mercy, you will find me cooperative and useful."

"Including the giving of information?"

"Reluctantly."

"On the Escape Line?"

"Reluctantly."

"You would betray your friends and comrades?

"I—do not see it in those terms."

"What terms do you see it in?"

"Mine."

"Which are?"

"*Parmigiano* rather than *pecorino*. Sometimes we make do. I talk for a while. You listen."

"You make it sound simple."

"Why complicate it?"

"A remarkably Damascene conversion. Your reasons?"

"In truth it is not sudden. It has been coming for months."

"You have come to realise that the war has been lost by the Allies?"

"Not that."

"Then what?"

"I realise I cannot continue. For me, it is over. I live like a mongrel skulking tunnels and holes, trying to remember every untruth and who I told it to, and why. Wondering who is my friend and who my murderer in disguise. I am hungry all the time. Night-terrors exhaust me. My nervous health has suffered, and my health has suffered in other, private ways. I have given enough. I haven't had a bath since December. We are almost a week into April. How many more reasons would you like?"

"I shall need names, code names, addresses, contacts. Everything you've got on the Choir, including how its leaders may be arrested."

"I cannot give you everything. I will give you what I can."

"You will give me everything."

"No."

"Then, give me something up front."

"Sam Derry, whom you and the world think an everyday Major, is in fact a credentialled secret agent of British military intelligence, with the rank of a two-star General. Twice daily he receives radio briefings from Bomber Command London. Many of them pertaining to the Allied beachhead at Anzio. I can tell you every troop and tank movement planned for the next two weeks. I have access to the transcripts."

"How is that?"

"I transcribe them."

"It seems odd, that Derry would trust you with such a task when you do not have clearance."

"If you must know, he has certain feelings for me."

"When did these begin?"

"That hardly seems any of your business."

"I shall decide that."

"Then decide it and be damned for all I care. Only know, there are things he has told me recently in a letting-slip way."

"What things?"

"Things that would be a feather in your cap to know. With Himmler."

"Such as?"

"All in good time. I have given you a free sample already."

"Your wider terms?"

"I have two. Do not attempt to run me as a double agent; I shall never set foot in the prison that is Vatican City again. Then, permission to return to this palazzo. To live here."

"That will not be possible. I am living here now."

"I do not ask that you leave immediately. What I ask is that I stay."

“How would that work in practice?”

“There is a studio, a sort of cottage, in which visiting art students used to work, at the end of the garden. A mattress could be brought in and a couple of blankets.”

“So, you would live in an outhouse.”

She regards him icily. “*You* would.”

“I see.”

“Until you have time to find somewhere else. A few days. No more. At which point you leave, and I never lay eyes on you again, and your thugs let me alone.”

“And what do I gain from this pact you’ve figured out?”

“I told you. I have information that would be helpful in restoring your reputation with Berlin. This restoration would help your family. You have two children, I think?”

“My children are none of your business.”

“Do you think they would be proud of you, Paul?”

“I hope so.”

She nods.

“How does that feel, Paul? Someone calling you by name? I assume everyone uses your rank or surname to address you.”

“It isn’t a matter I’ve given thought to.”

“I shall take a soupçon of that Barolo if you’d do the honours,” she says. Regarding him coolly. “May I ask of you a favour?”

“What is that?”

“A friend will go to the Vatican and collect my clothes and belongings tonight. She will leave them at the sentry box outside. You’re quite welcome to search them. In case you suspect that I’m smuggling something in.”

“Be assured, I shall.”

“She will need a pass in case she encounters a roadblock. Some of my things were expensive; one wouldn’t like them pawed by rough soldiers. There are some legal papers also. And a quantity of cash. Does your wife like good clothes?”

“This is not a subject that concerns you.”

“I know she is very beautiful. I saw you both in Rome sometimes, going about with your children.”

“I do not wish to speak of personal matters.”

“Nor do I.”

“I shall write the pass and send one of my sentries by motorcycle.”

“*Danke.*”

“Anything further?”

“I could do with a rinse and set. Could a hairdresser be arranged to come in tomorrow?”

“I shall ask one of the women at the office.”

“To do my hair, do you mean?”

“To find a hairdresser.”

“Ah. Relieved.”

“Are you ready to be questioned?”

“I have been hungry for months. May I have a few moments more, just to eat? And then we can talk.”

“Five minutes.”

Flares redden the sky.

Searchlights swoop.

A legion of Roman wildcats, dislodged by the bombs, go hissing and pissing through the burning piazzas, through the sizzle of the firework factory and the belching, burning library and the glister of shattered glass. From the Largo where Julius Caesar was murdered to the seeping, burst gutter by the Spanish Steps.

On the balcony at Palazzo Landini, she lights another gold-tipped Russian cigarette and watches the dogfights and downings, the parachutes. Draining her goblet, she steps back into the dressing room and selects a 78 for the gramophone, Darclée and De Marchi in *Carmen*.

“Do you mind terribly?” she asks him. “I’d like a little music while we’re talking.”

“Why is that?”

“I suppose to take my mind off what I am going to tell you.”

“If it helps.”

The old record is scratched, but its crackle is not without a brittle beauty. The lamps flicker as the generator strains.

“Music is such a consolation, don’t you find, Paul? It was here before we were born and will be here when we’ve gone.”

She raises her glass.

“To Bizet.”

“As you wish.”

“My late husband was once a Fascist. You didn’t know? Yes, he was. So was I, for a time. Not long enough, alas. I felt wrenched when the war came. Perhaps I jumped the wrong way. Did you ever jump the wrong way, Paul?”

“No.”

“Surely you must have.”

“One has idle thoughts, what-might-have-beens, they don’t matter. If you’re ready?”

“Forgive me, Paul, this feels strange. There is more guilt than I thought.”

“It is difficult to do what you are doing. The right thing is always difficult.”

“Need they know, do you think? That it was me who betrayed them.”

“When you fail to return to the Vatican, they may gather what has happened.”

“Will they suffer terribly?”

“The more you tell me now, the less they will need to suffer.”

“Could the women at least be spared indignity? One hears terrible stories.”

“We shall come to the women. Let us start with O’Flaherty. Any vulnerabilities you know of?”

“Such as?”

“The obvious ones for a priest.”

“Nothing of those, I’m afraid.”

“Where would be easy to arrest him? Be brave. Spit it out.”

He opens his notebook. She takes a long drink of water.

“You will return the Palazzo Landini to me,” she says, “and leave me in peace?”

“If the information you supply is worthwhile.”

“Who will be the judge of its worthwhileness?”

“I will.”

“No debate?”

“On certain matters, I can compromise. On others, not. The first matter on which I will not budge one millimetre is O’Flaherty. You will tell me how he may be apprehended. Without further delay.”

She nods. Takes a seat. Wipes away pulsing tears with her wrists.

“I do have some thoughts on that,” she says.

In her bedroom, Delia Murphy is at the three-mirrored dressing table, searching the drawers for a mislaid key, when the tactful knock comes on her door. Quarter to two in the morning. So late. Surely, the servants have gone to bed?

“Who is it?” she calls.

“The Queen of Sheba,” says her husband.

“Come in, dear. Is everything all right?”

He looks weary, stubbled, pallid in dismal pyjamas. The tartan slippers were a gift from Blon some seven years ago, are falling to pieces, but he won’t throw them away. The tray with tea things he’s carrying is silver plate and is not supposed to be used except on formal diplomatic occasions. If Dublin knew, there’d be telegrams of reprimand.

Broken spectacles fixed with sticking plaster. Under one armpit, a paperback.

“I was going up and saw your light was on,” he says. “I’ve brought you a cuppa.”

“My hero.”

“Thought I might—” he nods towards the bed. “You don’t mind?”

Rome and middle age have birthed this ritual between them. The air raids have made it more frequent. He comes to her room for a while, or she goes to his, and they read an hour or two in companionable silence before retiring again to their solitudes.

He switches on the brass lamp, fluffs the quilt given them as an anniversary gift by Jo Landini, lies down. Stares at the glass of water on the bedside locker, as though water is something he has never encountered. She returns to the crossword she's been doing. Two down. Ten across. But the sound of him riffling the pages distracts her and soon becomes unignorable; why can't he just *read*? Why must his books be *molested*?

"Bad one tonight," she says.

"The air raid?"

"No, the crossword."

"Sorry?"

"Of course, the fecking air raid, you gowl."

"The Circus Maximus's after being hit."

"Again?"

"So they say. I've to head out to the wretched prison in the morning; the Carabinieri lifted a couple of pilgrims from Navan who were after getting bladdered and making a nuisance of themselves in the bomb shelter. They'll have got themselves a good kicking, the same geniuses."

"That'll learn them."

"I doubt it. Them being from Navan."

On other nights, the wordlessness they lapse into feels consoling, even intimate. Tonight, it comes freighted differently. He is using it to communicate something; she has a sense of what it is. As in all love affairs that have lasted longer than a few months, saying nothing is a way of talking. Once, during a lecture they attended at the Accademia Nazionale, a professor told the audience a saying of Mozart's, that music is not sound alone but the silences between sounds. In the Daimler on the way home, she saw with clarity and recognition, as though happening upon a great landmark in all its sudden presentness, that the same was true of her marriage, perhaps of all marriages. When she'd said it to Tom in the car, he was asleep.

"What's that you're reading?" she asks.

"*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*."

"But—you've read it before."

"Many times."

"Where's the pleasure in that? If you know how it comes out? As the Cardinal said to the chorus girl."

"I'm forgetful. As you remember."

"Sure that's why I married you."

"It may not have been the main reason, but I daresay it's why we're not divorced."

"We're not divorced because we're Catholic."

"You say the sweetest things, Delia."

In this mood he is so like Blon, who has all his handsomeness and irony, his facility for saying things out straight by pretending to conceal them. A diplomatic trait, perhaps, but a good one in a spouse, too. It's a quality she'd like to have herself but never will.

In the silence he begins singing a country song, quietly, through his teeth, in a way he knows annoys her.

"Delia.
Oh, Delia.
Delia, all m'life.
If Delia hadna shot me,
I'da had her for my wife."

"Do you know who done it yet?" she asks him.

"Done what?"

"The murder of Roger Ackroyd."

"Don't they say it's always the character you least suspect."

"The nuns used to tell us that about the boys."

"I hope you listened."

"'When dancing closely with the quieter sort of boy—if dancing absolutely cannot be avoided—be sure to leave sufficient room between you for the Holy Ghost.'"

"Agostinelli was telling me you were at the Daimler again this evening."

"Who is Agostinelli when he's at home?"

"This new driver I've taken on. You'll have noticed him about. Told me he saw you attempting to start the Daimler. Then checking the tyres."

"What if I was?"

"Just remarking."

"'Tis hardly very remarkable."

"You are changing the subject."

"That is what subjects are for."

"Thank you, Delia, my love, for the Oscar Wilde impersonation, which is as scintillating and witty a way of getting off the topic as I have heard in donkey's years. Now will you promise me not to go out in that car tonight?"

"I'd promise you the moon and stars, dear."

"That is not what I asked for."

"That's what you're getting, Kiernan. Be grateful."

"Delia, I forbid you to go out in that Daimler tonight."

"I do love it when you forbid me, Tom. So masterful. Quite arousing."

"I will not be flummoxed off the point, Murphy. I'm long wise to your jig."

"Go to bed, love. You've nothing to worry about. I can promise you that."

They kiss fondly, briefly; he touches her hand to his lips.

"I'd be lost if anything happened you, Delia. Forgive my bossiness. Goodnight."

After he's gone, she says a prayer for him, tears stinging her eyes. A decent man, loyal, sees the best. Always will.

She opens a drawer in the dressing table. Takes the car key.

In the kitchenette of her flat, Ann Brunner takes apart the radio transmitter it took her seven weeks to build, puts the pieces in a pillowcase, descends to the hallway.

From the landing she hears the clock strike for three A.M. Hurries down the stairs, out to the street, down the binmen's laneway. Places the pillowcase in a stinking dustbin. Hot sweating hands.

An armoured car trundles past the alleyway's mouth. Someone shouts from an upper window that the manhunt squad seen earlier in the neighbourhood is here. Hauptmann's thugs are banking on Allied escapees and Jews getting driven from their hiding places by the air raid.

She hears the officer's roar: "Every apartment and landing. No exceptions. The suspects may be on the run already."

They're trying to shift the broken-down delivery truck that has blocked the street. Rugby-scrumming it, hefting, hauling, straining, but the hail of bricks from the rooftops is making it difficult and the driver's cab has been set on fire. The younger soldiers turn, frightened, while the officer barks them onward. "Get that moved."

She rushes back into the apartment building, up the rickety stairs. The landlord struggling down advises her to flee, get safe, don't come back until all this madness is over but Ann pushes past him, along the landing, into the living room of the flat, to the piano left by the previous tenant, a murdered Jew, opens its upright, removes the haversack, takes out a handful of the dozen Gestapo files it contains. Face slick with sweat. Where to go?

Just show the police your identity card.

But what if they insist on a search?

The tiny grate has been dark so long that the fire is unwilling to take. She strikes and exhausts a dozen matches, burnt fingers unsteady, but slowly, reluctantly, the papers yellow and blacken, now shrivelling, writhing, oozing spirals of smoke and a purple-gold flame gnaws its way into the pile, and soon she is gorging the grate with stuffed paper, but the weak flame is choked and more matches are needed.

In the kitchenette is a bottle of schnapps Hauptmann insisted on giving her as a birthday present ("I am not a fellow to be refused, dear Ann"). She grasps it, uncorks, shakes it into the grate, and the puny flame sizzles.

The clanging from down in the street as they attack the truck doors. Now handful after handful of Gestapo headed paper. Photographs. Signed confessions. Patrol movements. Marked-up maps. Orders signed by Himmler. Transit permits.

Terrifying to steal them, a monstrous waste to burn them before she has been able to get them to the Choir, but if they are destroyed before the squad comes, all will not be lost. Forcing bundles into the flames. Nothing to use as a poker so she uses her hands.

Her cuffs smoulder, catch fire, she crushes it out, stokes onward.

In a lull she hears the officer out on the street, bawling through a megaphone.

"*Hand over escaped prisoners. Persons harbouring criminals will be shot.*"

The room thickening with smoke. The haversack contains too many files. In every file, ten envelopes, in every envelope, twenty pages. The antimacassars blackening, and the photographs of her parents back in Sylt,

and her grandfather, the handsomest man in the Frisian islands, some said, in a fisherman's cap once snatched from his head by a gull, only to be washed up on the very beach near his cottage. The drawer in which the letters from her sister are kept, in the empty box that once contained candied fruits. Hands smarting where she burnt herself, she goes to the mirror.

If I die, I die. Let it be quick. Without pain.

No one is here for ever. Or would want to be here for ever.

Let it be Hauptmann leading the raid.

I'll take him with me.

From downstairs, she hears the thudding on the front door.

Retching, she tries to steady, but the battering grows so loud that the floorboards tremble.

She reaches again into the body of the piano, takes out the grenade she stole from headquarters three weeks ago. She knows how it is deployed, saw the soldiers do it on practice range, one morning when the office staff were forced by Hauptmann to go along in a bus and watch. Opening her apartment door, she steps onto the landing. Below her, police kicking their way into the hallway apartments.

Back inside, she tears off her clothes. Dons a dressing robe. Turns on the bath's heavy taps.

Already, the pounding.

"Who is it?" she calls.

"Security raid, open up."

"I am bathing."

"*Right now.*"

Holding closed the threadbare robe, she looks into the police sergeant's face. The grenade feels hefty in the dressing robe's hip pocket.

"I am Gestapo staff," she says, presenting her card. "What do you mean by bothering me at this hour?"

"I have my orders, miss. Every flat is to be searched."

"Obviously, this one is exempt."

"I smell smoke, miss. Your face is grimy. Is something the matter?"

"The wretched chimney is clogged with nests. I've complained to the landlord many times."

"Stand out of the way."

"You have no permission to enter this apartment."

"I'm short of time—" pushing past her—"do not interfere."

She tells herself to wait until more police are on the staircase below her, until they are here in the apartment, tearing open the haversack, then she will tug out the pin, utter a prayer for forgiveness.

The Sergeant walks into the living room, looks about, then enters the kitchenette. Opens the cupboards, one by one. The broom closet. Behind ornaments. Lifts the kettle as though what he is seeking is an infestation of ants.

Not the refrigerator, she prays.

"Live by yourself, miss?"

"Yes."

"Pretty girl like you."

"It suits me well."

"Nice little place," he says. "May I ask what you pay in rent?"

"The Gestapo pays the rent. I don't have those details."

Frail wisps of smoke drift out through the open window.

"Apologies for disturbing you, miss," says the Sergeant as he leaves. "You understand I have my duty. Goodnight."

She takes the haversack from the refrigerator. Places it in the piano. Hands trembling, pours a cup of cold coffee.

In the driver's seat of the Daimler, Delia curses, lights a cigarette, lost. The scribbled map she's been given is obsolete, fifteen years out of date. A mound of broken furniture has been piled across Via Donizetti. Via Tosca is cratered by a bomb.

Where is a way to the Tiber?

Nothing for it but to reverse.

She grinds the gears into the turn, clipping the Daimler's left fender on the hydrant, hears the headlight glass shatter. Faces back toward Via Mercutio, crosses the junction, takes a left, then a right.

Down a long, straight avenue, lined with ilex trees and shuttered shops. By memory now, by maps half-

forgotten, if ever seen. In the distance, through a gap, the iron horses atop the Altar of the Fatherland and she realises she's headed the wrong way, needs to find a westerly turn or she'll meet the checkpoint.

Sweat sticks her skirt to the backs of her stockings as she sinks the clunkily stubborn gear stick into bumpy second, and now she knows where she's going, recognises the street. The chapel she visited on her third morning in Rome, where the young nun with hazel eyes was distressed, wanting someone to talk to, and they'd sat in the pews like two girlfriends for an hour, but never met again despite their exchange of addresses.

Where can people be going at this time of night? A workman with a saw. Two dustmen wending home.

The heavy car ticking as she draws it to a halt.

Ahead, in the middle of the street, a German patrol. Stepping out of their covered truck. Soldiers with machine guns. Skittery Dobermans on lengths of chain.

A moment.

The captain beckons.

Too late to turn back.

Still an hour before dawn. Blunt belltowers, sharp spires. Tom is at home in bed. The servant will come to wake him. Terrible news, Mr. Kiernan. Come quickly.

As she jolts the Daimler forward, the captain squints, curious. Wondering what a car with diplomatic plates is doing in this part of town at an indecent time of night.

Fine motorcar, the Daimler. Luxurious, substantial. Craftsmanship they don't aspire to any more. Size of a sperm whale but it purrs like a kitten. People say being inside one is like being under the ocean, so quiet, another world. Don't see them in Rome much; when you do, it's someone with clout, an Archbishop, an Ambassador, a Cardinal.

On it comes slowly, windscreen wipers whapping. Beads of steaming rain on the blacktop and grille. The streamlined, sleek wing of its hood badge.

"You will halt," he calls out.

From behind, he hears his men click the anti-artillery gun onto its tripod, the scrape of the ammunition belts on broken paving slabs. In training, he saw that weapon reduce a captured tank to fiery fragments in one shot, still remembers the sight of its bolts and bits of plating pinwheeling through the air, the stench, and the rain of rivets. Ninetynine trainees at the demonstration that morning. Each got to take a piece home.

A *woman* in the driver's seat?

Curious.

Wonder who she is.

"My name is Kiernan," she says. "I am on an errand for Commander Hauptmann's household at the Palazzo Landini."

"You have clearance?"

"Here is a pass he signed in person tonight and ordered delivered to me by one of his sentries, by motorcycle. Everything is in order, as you'll see."

He takes it, reads carefully, nods, hands it back.

"Very good. You may continue."

"Thank you, dear. Oh. May I ask your advice?"

"Of course."

"I am trying to find the river."

"Turn left. You can't miss it."

Awakening at the dining table, to the hiss of surging rainfall, Hauptmann is heavy-headed, confused. A moment, and he realises his wrists are tied behind his back and the laces of his boots knotted together.

She is observing him from the sofa. Smoking. Glass of wine in hand. Her hair in damp strings, unloosed. The man's black shirt she has changed into is too large and half unbuttoned. She closes it, still watching him, puts links through the cuffs. At her feet the pregnant vixen in a dog basket.

Taking a towel from her knees, she wraps it around her head like a turban.

"*Allora*," she says. "Here we are."

Rising, she tucks the shirt into the pants, goes to the full-length mirror he has always disliked. She does something he can't see. It opens into the room like a door.

"*A cosa stai pensando?*" she asks, with a strange, bleak smile. "What is little Paul thinking?"

"Let me go."

"*Mio dio*," she says. "What a sound sleeper is little Paul when he is with his new friend Giovanna. Why, I

must be dreadfully boring. A girl could get sensitive. Usually do you find it difficult to sleep, darling?"

"Sometimes."

"Yes, it can happen with intelligent people with a lot on their minds. When I suffer from sleeplessness myself, I take valerian root. It grows in my herb garden, downstairs."

"I should try it."

She flourishes a smile.

"Oh, you have."

"Untie me, I warn you."

The wine thrown in his face tastes of ashes.

"Good for little Paul to have a nap when he's been working so hard. I put valerian root in your *cacio e pepe*, with five grains of surgical anaesthetic to season your mushroom sauce. You'll be feeling a little groggy for a while, but I shouldn't worry if I were you."

"You're the one who should be worried."

"Thirteen of my pictures are missing. Where are they?"

"In safekeeping."

"You didn't give them away? To Hitler, for example?"

"Of course not."

"I am relieved. So will you be."

"Why is that?"

"They were copies." She shrugs, as though it was obvious. "I moved the originals into the Vatican at the start of the war. You wouldn't want the Führer discovering you sent him worthless forgeries, would you, Paul? Though I'm sure he'd see the funny side. He's famous for that."

"Release me and I'll overlook this. I give you my word."

"To be honest, I never cared for them, gloomy old daubs. The picture I like best in the whole house is a rather workaday portrait of myself. Not very fine but commissioned by my husband as a birthday gift. I am glad to see it is still here."

"Turn back from what you are doing. I warn you a last time."

A flicker of lamps makes a witch of her. Black hair flashes blue. For an instant it as though he can see through her skin. Like looking at an X-ray or a vision of her as an old woman.

"While you were sleeping do you know what I did, Paul? You'll think me a tremendous annoyance. I went to the corridor where you stowed your prison files and one by one emptied them out into the storm. It was beautiful in its way. The wind seemed to love them."

"I will burn your house to the ground."

"This is not my house."

"Stop talking in riddles."

As though knowing the flicker is coming, she waits, and it comes, and she nods as though bidding it farewell before fixing on him again.

"Palazzo Landini and everything in it belongs to a neutral country's head of state. Burning it would be a war crime."

"Rubbish."

"Under the terms of a legal indenture made in 1938, this house is the property of the Holy See, in perpetuity. I am permitted to live in it until my death. I am a tenant. Nothing more."

"Why did you come here tonight?"

She regards him.

"To tell you lies and keep you busy. It was easier than I thought."

"I'll see you hang," he says quietly. "You and your filthy comrades."

"I am borrowing this haversack—" she holds it up—"and some little items you can spare. It will be useful for the Escape Line to have a Gestapo Commander's uniform. Not to mention his Luger and seven boxes of ammunition. Oh, and the ninety thousand dollars I found in your pillowcase. Forged, I know. But with skill."

"That money is for my children and wife. Give it back."

"I've left you a few surprises. You'll find them over time. You've been of tremendous assistance to the Choir, Paul. I should like you to know that. When you remember this moment—when it eats at your mind—remember the Landinis are laughing. *Vielen Dank*."

Leaving, she wrenches closed the heavy mirror-door behind her and descends, hurriedly now, through the turret's spiral staircase. Past the ledges where nightingales weave their nests in spring. Red light through arrow-slits as cautious dawn approaches from the Apennines, then out, through the garden, to the well.

Over it, a lychgate. Like a well in a storybook. Bucket on a rope with an oaken pulley.

She climbs down the narrow shaft, holding hard to the rungs set into the brickwork.

Downward, further down, through the layers of the city. Downward past the stratum where Caligula flounced, where St. Peter raged in chains, where the gladiators awaited the beasts, downward through the seams of silt and slimy clay, then down through a hole dug through bedrock.

In the tunnel, she slogs steadily, sapping strength she doesn't have, for there is no time for tears, only strength. Sinews burn in her forearms; her muscles feel like bricks. Her husband is close, subsisting in the ever-darkness, alive in the underworld around her, alive in her pain. The water level dropping quickly as the springtide above lowers the Tiber; she squelches the last two hundred metres, through dank puddles of mud and the stink of the ancient airlessness. Strange lichens on the walls, on the roof, in white clusters, and millions of minuscule crabs. The sense of being inside a body, the carcass of a giant, whose spine of corbelled granite can never be broken, no matter the blows it sustains. Past graffiti carved on the rocks before Michelangelo was born, through caves that have never heard language.

Hauptmann loosens his bindings, limps to the telephone—she has knifed through the line. He hammers at the mirrored door, now manages to kick it open, descends the winding stairs, bricklike military-grade flashlight in hand. He hobbles down, out into the garden, through the scattering peahens, grabs a rusting slash-hook from its nail on the door of a shed, follows her boot-prints across the sodden lawn to the well. He climbs down the runged shaft. Further down, into what seems to be a grotto, where the suck of the swampy floor at his heavy boots disgusts him and the stench from the darkness stings his eyes.

Gurgling, draining water, like the splutter of a monster. The hoots of weird birds and whatever they prey on.

Stumbling through the murk. Trying to steady.

Ahead of him, in the sludge, something that looks like a coffin but turns out to be an upturned canoe.

Is that sound—a man whistling?

Just a trick of the darkness.

Breeze through the tunnels goes fluting and sighing. It is mournful, but not ugly, no one fair could call it that. Music coming up through the mud. Sorrowing, organlike, ghoul-subterranean, a pizzicato of plicks from the moss-slathered ceiling.

From the murk, a hundred pairs of glinting amber eyes, and the orchestra of chorused purrs.

A strange attentiveness in the watchfulness. As though it can read him. One of the cats licks her sister's head; another skulks forward, dropping a mangled nightingale at his feet. A third is trying to burrow out a burial place for her droppings, glowering at him as she scratches the stone. He sees his shadow gibber on the rockface, feels his thoughts leave his body, like spores drifting zones of uninhabitable darkness or evasions being spilled out against his will. The eyes, long accustomed to this depth's gloom, rarely blink. Even when they have darkened, for their owners have slunk away—he is not worth the effort of watching, or scaring, or hissing at—he has the sense of being observed by an immensity.

A bleak, sneering wind. The chuckle of the Tiber through the passageways.

Alone, he hears the echo of his breath.

Rage comes reddening like a blown-upon ember.

Resurfaced to the Palazzo, he storms his way to the gallery, slash-hook in hand. Vengeance will be wreaked on the object he knows her to value.

Think you've escaped me, Contessa?

You'll pay a price.

The oaken door has been locked.

He kicks it in.

A picture-framer's knife glints up at him from the gallery floor.

The portrait of her is gone, canvas cut out of its burnished teak frame, which dangles, crooked, permitting itself to be seen through, like a strange window looking at nothing.

31

FOUR MINUTES LATER

Osborne, Angelucci, and the Monsignor leave the Curia, cross the walkway and, through a side door used by mop-women, enter the basilica. The vast space shimmers with its own emptiness as they hurry down the nave, turn for the staircase to the Sistine Chapel.

The three make their way through the maze of umbrous corridors, down a staircase, out into the half-light, past the barrack block of the Swiss Guardsmen, to the front gates.

Ten feet high, black cast-iron, the weight of an ox, the gates have been in place for four hundred and fifty years and are the only means by which a vehicle can enter Vatican City. The lock is the size and thickness of a Bible; its keys are held by the Sergeant at Arms on duty, whom Osborne hastens through the sleet to approach.

The Sergeant gives the ancient salute, stands to attention, but looks uneased by the dawn-lit apparitions before him. Normally this watch is quiet, no one comes in or goes out.

"Sergeant, I have the honour to serve as King George's Minister to the Holy See. I wonder if you might assist me regarding a little difficulty?"

"Sir?"

"A patient is being driven here, seriously ill, in need of emergency care at the Vatican infirmary. The Holy Father does not yet know. We didn't want to trouble His Holiness unduly. Here is an envelope containing a little gift for you, with which to make a charitable donation. Could you possibly see your way clear to opening those gates like a good fellow?"

"Absolutely not, sir," the Guardsman replies. "I am sworn to protect the Holy Father in the Vatican City. Those gates are locked at dusk and not opened before dawn without the Holy Father's permission. If I opened them at another time, I'd be court-martialled."

"Now look, son," says the Monsignor, speaking in Latin, "you're a good boy and it's admirable, and I admire a bit of stubbornness, but the gates are getting opened one way or another."

"No, Monsignor."

"Give us the keys, friend," Angelucci says, "and I'll open the gates myself. That way, you'll be in the clear."

"Impossible."

Angelucci steps forward, seizes the Guardsman by the forearms, while the Monsignor grabs the chain of heavy keys from his belt. Osborne, aghast, peers over his shoulder. The Monsignor makes his way towards the lock.

A light goes on in the building behind them and a long, black shadow is thrown across the cobblestones. They turn and see the figure in the doorway.

Tall, slow-moving. His breath in clouds of steam. The redness of his robe like an inflammation. Head high as he approaches. Crucifix glittering about his neck. Face ashen with rage. Sandals flopping.

Deuteronomy could be read cover to cover in less time than it takes him to speak.

"You are?"

"Osborne, Holy Father, British Minister to the Holy See."

"'Osborne, Holy Father, British Minister to the Holy See,'" Cardinal Ventucci repeats, a faint mockery of lordly Britishness colouring his scorn. "The court of St. James offers naked contempt. Disregard for our rule. Attempted bribe of our pontifical soldiery. London shall hear of this outrage."

"If I may—"

"You may *not,* sir. We are a sovereign independent state. Remain silent. Or pack your bags. We are not one of your misfortunate colonies to be commanded what to do."

Osborne bows his head, nodding. The Cardinal's shining eyes range around the quartet like those of a hawk choosing which prey to devour. The selection does not take long.

"O'Flaherty," says the Cardinal freezingly. "I might have known."

"Your Eminence—"

"Up to your old tricks again. Every disobedience that goes on, you are part of."

"If I may—"

"Close the hole in your face. Before I strike you."

Something moves in the bushes. All heads turn but the holiest.

"How many dozens of times, O'Flaherty, must you be reprimanded and warned. The Holy Father himself has ordered you to desist."

"Your Eminence, if I may, there is a sick man coming."

"*There is a sick man already here.* Quite unable to listen. Deaf, blind, stubborn, and unable to think. Give me back those keys. I command it."

The Monsignor places the ring of keys into the Cardinal's trembling hand.

The Cardinal walks slowly to the gates and turns the keys in the heavy ancient lock, now beckoning to the Guardsman to help him haul them open. Angelucci and Osborne lurch forward to assist.

"Thank you, Your Eminence. *Grazie mille, Eminenza*."

He turns and eyes O'Flaherty for a horribly long time—"Never again disregard the Vatican's rules. Last warning. We mean it"—before stalking back towards the Curia with grave shakes of his head, muttering to himself in Latin about Ireland.

Shortly after 7 A.M., a Daimler with diplomatic plates reverses up slowly to St. Caspian's steps.

The airman, unconscious, is carried to the back seat. Blon and Manon squeeze into the front with Delia, both so exhausted by the trek through the dangerous tunnels with the patient that they judder into uneasy sleep. Weldrick hops on the running board, gesturing to Moody to *hurry along.* Derry opens the trunk and climbs in.

Moody hands Weldrick a small leather-bound book.

"What's this, Moon?"

"Little memento of tonight, Judge. My favourite thriller."

"Didn't take you for a reader."

"You was right."

"So get in the car."

"I ain't coming," Moody says.

"Quit kidding around. Course you're coming."

Moody shoulders his machine gun, claps Weldrick on the arm.

"In the movie, Judge? Here's the part with the rain and the violins. See you down the trail some time."

"Christ, Moon. Get on board."

"Take my chances out here. *Arrivederci*. Hit the bricks."

"You're ever in Evanston, Illinois and need a lawyer, look me up."

"Ever in Staten Island and need a beer, call my secretary, Dolores."

"Nice girl?"

"Wouldn't go that far."

"How far would you go?"

"Far as she'd let me. See you round."

Less than a minute later, the Daimler is reversing from the riverbank. Weldrick opens the book at the page where Moody has placed the ribbon-bookmark and underlined a passage of Isaiah.

When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned.

German sentries clock the Daimler entering Via di Porta Angelica at a quarter past seven, from where it drives across the cobbles to the opened papal gates. At 7.17 it enters the Vatican.

The sick man is taken quickly to the Vatican infirmary, where he is nursed with skill and care, given transfusions of blood from Angelucci and Marianna de Vries, attended by an Austrian surgeon, a Jew, himself a fugitive from Fascism; but his condition deteriorates, and on Easter Monday morning, Bruno Wiśniewski, fading quickly, asks to dictate a letter of farewell to his parents and indicates that he wishes to make Confession.

Angelucci finds an elderly Polish priest able to do what is needed for the young airman. The last rites of the dying are performed by Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, who with Jo Landini and the Kiernans has sat all night at the bedside praying the rosary. At 7.09 on Tuesday 11th April 1944, Bruno Wiśniewski is pronounced dead.

Mother, Father,

Thank you for my life. No child ever had a more loving Tata and Mama. I am cared for with gentleness and am at peace. There is no pain any more. My heart is full of happy memories of home and friends. The river and the ships, and the trees in the park. I have received the holy sacraments. God bless you both and my sisters and Grandfather, tell them I died fighting. We will all be together again one day. I am not afraid. Pray for me. Long live Poland.

Your son,

The letter is given to John May, who has a means nobody ever asks about of smuggling it out of the Vatican for delivery via the diplomatic bag of a country he never names, but in the event, that never happens.

As he is taken to the mortuary on that rainy Tuesday morning, Bruno Wiśniewski's eyelids are observed to flicker. The attendants, frightened, refuse to proceed. No doctor being available at that moment, an Ethiopian nursing sister is summoned from the wards; she places a hand on his chest and says the heart is weakly beating. A stethoscope confirms this. Surgeons rush to the corridor. Somehow, he comes back, minute by minute, hour by hour, and over the following weeks recovers sufficiently to be able to attend, and then to serve, Mass every morning at the chapel of Sts. Michael and Petronilla within St. Peter's.

On May Day, he absconds from the Vatican and makes his way to the partisan ranks to fight the Nazis, his unit blowing up seven Gestapo substations and burning down three. After the war, he becomes a welder and, in 1981, at the Lenin shipyards in Gdańsk, a leader of the trade union, Solidarność.

In a matchbox he keeps the object removed from his neck all those years ago in Rome: a crumped masonry nail spat out by a toppling wall. "I bailed out of a Spitfire, got shot, bombed, starved, chased by Fascists, poisoned by the wrong medicine. But this—" he holds it up—"is what almost killed me." Holding it up to the light like a precious relic. "God blessed the hands that took it out. Heaven rest her."

The night Manon Gastaud dies of Roman flu, 11th May 1944, a shattered gas main bursts into fire near the south-eastern gable of the Palazzo Landini, spreading quickly to the old stable block and from there to the coach house and the nearby back streets. The fire burns for six nights, during which a savage windstorm blows in from the Tyrrhenian, many Romans reporting the spectral sight of flaming ballgowns in the sky over Via Landini, some with long, trailing trains, leaking sparks. Others report visions of a blackened metal archangel.

On the seventh night, a three-man Allied commando unit on Special Forces surveillance mission into the city takes shelter at the foot of the pyramid of Cestius, near the Protestant cemetery. Their captain's report includes mention of an inscription "not classical in origin," carved into the pyramid's northern face, a yard or so above the ground. "Jack Moody. Staten Island. 100th goon killed today. Read it and weep, Nazi scum."

The following dusk, the quietening fire at the Palazzo reignites, becoming a guidelight for an Allied bombing raid, during which one of the hail of rockets enters the well shaft in the main courtyard immediately behind the Palazzo's oldest wing. The crater that results is the size of the Pantheon. But the Palazzo refuses to collapse.

In June, it becomes a hospital and sanctuary run by the Blue Sisters of the Poor.

Jo Landini funds the rebuilding but never sets foot there again.

She tells people she gave up the house for Lent 1944, that the price was never taking it back.

The hospital chapel is dedicated to "Manon Gastaud, Surgeon and Friend."

The Allies advance on Rome.

Coda
The Road Beyond Killorglin

KILLARNEY, COUNTY KERRY, IRELAND

SATURDAY 17TH JULY 1965

The Raidió Éireann newsreader sounds weary this morning—emigration, unemployment, the high cost of living, *agus anois, an aimsir* ("and now, the weather").

There is so little to celebrate out of that confounded wireless, like every other morning since the damn thing was got, that the Maître d' wonders if having it on in the breakfast room is a good innovation at all. People are on their holidays; some are after coming all the way from America. There are also newlyweds. You don't want to be depressing them. Life and being married will do that.

Tactfully, he switches it off.

Sunlight on Lough Leane. The echoed whop of nine-irons. The chatter of fine china and the smell of crisp rashers.

Three middle-aged people older than their years are seated in the breakfast room of the Europe Hotel and Golf Resort looking out at the gorse-goldened mountain and the lake.

Contessa Giovanna Landini pours coffee for Delia Kiernan and Bruno Wiśniewski, and returns to her magazine of crosswords, bought on the hurry through London Airport. Delia, who has been told by her doctors not to smoke, is smoking, and idling through an out-of-date guidebook to Killarney. Queen Victoria visited the town. There is an illustration of Her Late Majesty. It brings a bawdy ballad loved by Delia's father into Delia's mind.

> *"The Queen she came to call on us,*
> *She wanted to see all of us,*
> *I'm glad she didn't fall on us,*
> *She's eighteen stone."*

Bruno butters a toast crust and looks out the windows at the lake-light. The blue of a sinking moon. Steam rising from the fairways. A stocky man, habitually cheerful, he is silent just now, as though observing a rare bird that might be disturbed by his scrutiny. Even the way he raises the cup to his mouth is tactful. Back in Poland, there is rarely good coffee.

Herr Liebherr, the hotel owner, approaches the table with a brisk, quick bow and asks if breakfast is quite satisfactory. The Contessa requests him to join them for a cup of coffee if he has time. Glancing at his watch, he says he has.

Despite knowing almost nothing of each other's languages, Wiśniewski and he seem to have established some sort of rapport, which to the Contessa seems to be based on the intimate workings of machines. Liebherr owns tractor and crane factories in the town, Bruno is a welder in a Gdańsk shipyard. Liebherr, as promised yesterday, has brought a set of complicated schematic drawings for Wiśniewski to see. They nod over them, smoke, exchanging glances of slightly confused benevolence, Liebherr speaking German, Wiśniewski speaking Polish, while Delia and the Contessa speak of the scenery, in English and Italian.

"Sure where would you get it, Jo?"

"*È bellissima.*"

"*By Killarney's lakes and fells*," Delia quotes from an old song. "*Mountain paths and woodland dells.*"

In the gravelled expanse outside the foyer, a hired car is waiting, its driver talking weather with the bellboys and the cluster of caddies and jaunting-car men who converse of Gaelic football. You'd have to fear Cork. Limerick are no-hopers. The thing about the Dubs is, you'd never rule them out. The game isn't done till they're washed and gone home. Even then, they might bang over a point.

A countryman with a horse and cart is delivering churns of milk. "We've a day made in heaven, thank God."

"Just saying you wouldn't trust the Dubs, John."

"You wouldn't for certain sure."

Giovanna, Delia, and Bruno, now making their way out of the hotel, are joined by a nervous-looking woman

coming up the woodchip path from the cluster of rose gardens: Irena, Bruno's wife. Her lack of English has made mealtimes a little trying for her on the trip; often she makes the excuse of wanting to go for a walk, to take photographs with the little Box Brownie she inherited from her father, and here in Ireland the walks are so bracing and beautiful. She is finding the visit difficult; the Irish talk with such crunch-jawed, startling rapidness, their welcome has a glare to it. To be away from her grandchildren is hard. The Party refused them an exit visa, as she and Bruno knew would happen. Children, no matter their age, are rarely permitted to leave Poland now. It is the surest way to ensure the return of travelling adults.

On the Aeroflot from Warsaw, he drank too much vodka. At Shannon he stumbled through Customs, bottles stuffed in the pockets of his ill-fitting suit, snapping at her about wanting to get European or American cigarettes for his friends back home and jeans for his friends' sons to sell. Always there is the past, like an unwanted lodger in their marriage. She is aware of what happened in Rome—the drop, the hiding out, the terrible circumstances of the operation—but he knows little enough of it himself, had been raving or unconscious for most of those weeks, has rarely answered the children's questions. Now, for it to return, the blaze of things that are best left unexamined. You don't have to forget—that would be asking too much. At the same time, you don't have to remember.

She is worried about him, and uncomfortable, and afraid and reserved and afraid of being afraid and of not knowing the language. Afraid of the cutlery in the hotel. The trip, she feels, could be a mistake. Late at night in their sumptuous suite, for which the Contessa is paying—it is larger than their flat in Gdańsk, as he keeps finding reasons to repeat—she sees him smoking on the balcony, gazing down at the lake, as though the past is a monster shimmering into moonlit visibility there. She knows what it is to have a rival.

The bellboy brings the hampers of picnic luncheon Dr. Liebherr wants them to have and stows them into the back of the 1937 black Jaguar that is the property of a local business: Clifford's Funeral Directors and Chauffeur. A cloud darkens the putting green near the car park.

The driver, John Clifford, has five sons who went to work on the building sites in England, a country against whose forces, as a young man, he fought in these hills.

"Lovely morning, Contessa, nice to see you with us in Kerry again. I'm the right side of the grass, thank God, your good self? And Mrs. Kiernan, how's the family, we'd your husband down the other month, never saw him looking better. Sorry now, I've no Polish, but it's honoured I am to meet and drive your friends. Sir, you are welcome to the Kingdom, as we call it. Exceptionally welcome. Sit you in to the back there, yourself and the good lady, and get yourselves cosy and we'll motor."

Starting out for Cahersiveen, the twisty road climbs, past the stony, thistledown fields, the five-bar gates like scraps of leftover music manuscript, the curious munching cows with their movie-star eyes, past the milk churns rusting in ditches. Here and there, an abandoned cottage or a pigsty built of old millboards and bathtubs. The giants of ESB pylons on their march to the horizon. A rain shower comes and goes.

Mr. Clifford, an experienced chauffeur, has a sense of when to talk. ("If you're driving the hearse and you talk over your shoulder, you don't want to hear talking back.") That castle. This bridge. That waterfall through the trees. The golf course at the foot of the mountain, Monsignor O'Flaherty played there often as a young gossoon—a fine golfer, like his father before him—could bang it down the fairway like nobody's business, even played beyond in Rome, with Mussolini's son one time, could have been a club professional, so they say.

Through the passes and hills, the hamlets and crossroads. The places with names carved on milestones in the Irish language and the places whose names are forgotten, except by old men in the Bronx who spit those names in the gutter, glad never to have to say them again. A dolmen in a field, near a mast for the radio station. A rusted Coca-Cola sign outside a whitewashed, desolate pub.

On the road beyond Killorglin, Bruno Wiśniewski is quiet. He is thinking of the Irish priest to whose memorial Mass they are headed, of those painful days of recovery in the Vatican infirmary, O'Flaherty showing him newspaper photographs of boxers and golfers as the Contessa whose choice saved his life came and went from the sickbed. Some stoniness of the landscape raises memories of Szkocja, he tells his wife. The Polish word for Scotland is passed between them like a marble.

She knows his recollections of Scotland are coloured by grief. Many of the young men with whom he trained never came home from the war. Happy times in Szkocja, building sea fortifications, doing drills. Armwrestling the local cadets for bragging rights or glasses of beer. Studying in the mornings, pretending to understand the endless manuals. Lying out on the barracks rooftop beneath the western Highlands' stars. One midnight they watched a comet burn its way across the bowl of the northern sky, so close that you felt you could clasp it. The ferries at Stranraer. The strange place names so difficult for a Gdańsk boy to say: Dalmellington. Urr. Eskdalemuir. Auchencairn. Kinlochbervie. Buittle. Dalbeattie. A weekend when a circus came to the village—Irena tells him not to be ridiculous, the circus can't have come to the village in wartime, but he knows that it did, for he was there with a girl Irena doesn't know about, whose name he can't remember any more.

There was an elephant on the green outside the Presbyterian church as he walked that girl home, hand in hand. Unable to converse, for they didn't know one another's words, but he remembers a necklace she had on and the sight of her gazing up at the elephant and the feel of her back through her dress.

Clowns smoking in a field with the acrobats. Tethered ponies. A gloomy sea lion. Flight Sergeant Stadnik got angry at roll call and inspection. Ripping apart your bed if it wasn't made to regulation.

Captain Slowinski used to twinkle and sing down the pub. What was its name? Crown and Thornbush. How alike he and Stadnik were to look at, yet not similar at all when you looked harder. The boys called them "Jekyll and Hyde," which got laughs, but it wasn't true.

Both killed at Monte Cassino.

Other names.

All these years later, his waistline has thickened. More hair in his ears than on his head, is his joke. But there are still nights when the unreturned friends come to him through dreamfields of sleep like horses trotting across a meadow in the rain.

In airmen's fogged-up goggles. Frail fingertips outstretched.

"Bruno, let's go dancing, there are pretty girls in the village."

"Bruno, won't you come to Dalbeattie?"

"*Towarzyszu, gwiazdy są piękne. Chcemy, żebyś wrócił do domu.*"

Other nights they say nothing, just beckon. To some zone among the wincing stars, where so many lost their lives. He'll open the mirrored door of a wardrobe to an airman staring back or weeping into bloodstained gauntlets.

Broken milestones for the Ring of Kerry and the Skellig Islands. Glenbeigh. Dooks. Coolnaharragill. Kells Bay. Stuck behind a tractor for a mile and a half. Now a flock of raggedy sheep spilling over the ditches like a flood but Mr. Clifford says not to worry, he has built in extra time for the rural eventualities, a phrase he enjoys deploying for his customers.

Past a sign for Inchimacteigue.

"Cahersiveen in fifteen minutes," Mr. Clifford says. "Are you good in yourself, Contessa?"

She nods in the mirror, feels anxiety and reluctance. How pleasing it would be to run from the car, flee across those fields. Walk in the Purple Mountains alone.

Rainy light. Battered trees. A lightship in the distance.

The jade green of the sea brings Paolo's eyes. He is planting a lemon tree in a garden. A shatteringly hot morning—visiting the Colosseum with relatives from France. He noticed a tourist couple carving their names into a pillar. She and her cousin tugged him away, the air scorching with his blasphemies. She remembers the couple so vividly that it shocks her—she barely remembers last week, sometimes forgets what month it is, or the names of flowers. Later the same day he clambered fully dressed into the boat-shaped fountain in the Piazza di Spagna—an acrobat was walking on her hands down the Spanish Steps—to retrieve a child's strayed balloon.

Now he's riding his favourite Norton, engine growling as it surges. A tidy, brisk, furious hornet of a machine used in speedway racing. The fancy comes to her that he is following Mr. Clifford's car. Along the boreens of Kerry, like a motorcycling god. Leaping hedgerows and drystones, rattling over cattle grids. Belting out Puccini to the crows.

At Strand's End they stop for Delia to go into a pub and use the facilities, but there are no arrangements for ladies, the publican explains, there wouldn't be the call. She insists on trespassing into the Gents. During her absence, his customers, two old farmers, laugh at their host; he is jeered for not recognising the intruder. "Chrisht, is it bat blind you're gone, sham?" Now realising who she is, he hurries into the back of the shop, to the dresser where his late parents' gramophone is kept, finds among the John McCormacks and Richard Taubers an old 78 of her ballad-singing, cover torn, takes it back to the bar, asks her to sign it, which she does. A double Redbreast on the house. A brief song.

"When the Tsar of Roosha, and the King of Proosha,
Landed in the Phoenix in a big balloon,
They asked the Garda band to play 'The Wearing of the Green,'
But the buggers in the depot didn't know the tune."

As she leaves, seven minutes later, silence returns to Sullivan's bar, broken only by the plocking of the clock behind the optics.

"Twould be hard to keep that one down," one farmer says, after a while.

"She wouldn't be long bouncing up to bite you," agrees the other.

"A two-bucket woman," says the publican.

In the portico of the church, the parish priest and his curate are waiting. But no one is concerned by the visitors' late arrival, things always start a little late around here; starting punctually would be seen as a discourtesy to those having to travel a long way as country people often must.

Bunting has been hung from the gates, a yellow-and-white Vatican banner from one freshly painted flagpole, the bedraggled Irish tricolour from the other. A photographer from the newspaper in Tralee bunches the group of visitors in the porch—"In the middle, please, Contessa, at the back there, Delia." A bit reluctantly, the two priests agree to be cajoled into the photograph, as does the parish priest's widowed sister, Mrs. English. Mr. Clifford is hoping to be asked but is not.

There is an uncertain attempt at applause as the honoured group come into the crowded church, genuflecting, shaking hands, returning shy waves, but it is silenced by the tactful look from the parish priest as they make their way to the bench nearest the altar rails. A farmer at the back, calling out, "You're welcome here," is shushed. Assisted by her parents, a little girl with Down's syndrome makes a presentation of wildflowers and a leather-bound prayerbook. The parish priest, taking the pulpit, waits for the people to settle, before reminding everyone of why we're here. Not for a party. For holy Mass.

The antiphon is sung in Gaelic by seven local men, unaccompanied, for the organ is not working today. Outdoorsmen voices, the psalms as work-songs, music to haul a bull out of a ditch to. The Gospel is from John 14: "In my father's house are many mansions." The sermon speaks of courage. On the good day and the dark day. In the face of Satan's armies.

The man we commemorate today was one of our own. But he was also one of God's. That came first. The world gave him plenty of warning, leave off what you're at. Always, he refused to listen. Enemies, friends, they all warned him off. Some even here in our own home place said he ought not have come to the assistance of England's soldiers and her people. Some still do. That's not how he saw it.

God has no passport.

God has no flag.

God has no country.

God is God.

Men and boys in the benches on the left side face the altar; women and girls on the right. The women in hats and veils; men's caps and trilbies on the weathered grey flagstones. Only very young children would be allowed to cross the nave. Here, things are done the old way.

The priests' vestments are costly, sent away for to Belgium, paid for by the dues of the people. Parishioners go hungry for that to happen.

The altar lace is made by the Sisters of St. Louis at Carrickmacross. The statues are of Carrara marble, the confessional boxes of polished walnut. Delia has in mind that the Stations of the Cross were carved from the oaken hull of a sunken trawler dragged up from the depths twenty miles out from Ventry, but that is not so, she's misremembering. A stained-glass window of the Virgin needs repairing, cracked by a winter tempest rampaging up from the Atlantic. The aroma of candle wax does its best to colour the air, wrangling with the redolence of turf smoke and the sea.

After Holy Communion is received, there is a silence, broken sometimes by babies and gulls, and the distant bark of a hard-working sheepdog. The priest gives his nod of invitation.

Delia rises and walks to the altar rails, bows her head, makes the sign of the cross. As she turns to the congregation, the wave of silent expectancy is like a change of the light, although most of the heads before her remain lowered. The blue dress and hat she has on were bought in Rome twenty years ago; the gloves in Dublin last week. About to sing, she looks younger, her own daughter, eyes shining. She waits, saying nothing, as though waiting for the incense she has walked through to settle or for something once disturbed to be restored.

"O suavitas et dulcedo
Humani generis
Jesu Christe,
Qui pro nostra salute
In cruce extensus fuisti."

Eyes closed. Hands clenching. Voice echoing around the nave. In pauses between the lines, and the echoes

of the lines, the buffet of the lonesome Kerry breeze.

"A te nunquam possim separari.
Amen."

Singing plainly. With directness. No grace notes where the melody yearns to have grace notes, no wine where it wants to be water. As though the chapel and its stones and the graves and Laharn Bog are elements of the composition. Women and old men clutch their beads in recognition of something only communicable in music, but the children are writhing with boredom for the Mass has run on long. A hawk circles the steeple. Waves move on rocks. The Amen dies away, melting into the slates, and after a moment in which she gives it space to go wherever it is going, its absence growingly powerful, until it comes to feel like a presence, she returns, blushing hard, to the empty seat beside the black-veiled Contessa who takes her arm without needing to look at her. The priest permits the silence to last—like something wishing to be followed—before standing to give the blessing of farewell. His voice is quieter than earlier. There is a sense that he has stopped giving an impersonation of himself. A hymn is sung in Gaelic as he leaves.

Tea and sandwiches have been organised in the good room at the parochial house. Bruno Wiśniewski's wife takes photographs. She promises to send them, makes notes of her subjects' addresses on the flyleaf of her guidebook, the children queue up to be next. Being photographed is a novelty. Many country people never will be.

Farmers' wives have baked heavy teacake and apple tarts; an auctioneer who is also a publican has provided a dozen bottles of stout, somewhat to the priests' disapproval.

Schoolchildren display for the visitors a project undertaken this past spring, a banner depicting crayoned hands clenched together in friendship, around its borders the entwined flags of Poland and Ireland, of Italy and the United Kingdom, of Kerry and the United States. Many of the children have family in Manchester and Boston; most will emigrate themselves. Delia remarks that she didn't know County Kerry had a flag. It hasn't, says the teacher, but the children designed one of their own, using the football colours, gold and green.

"Up the Kingdom," says Mr. Clifford. "Down the Dubs."

The speeches are short. More photographs are taken. People have come from Listowel and Tarbert, from Dingle and Glenbeigh, even in from the Blasket Islands. "From all over the civilised world," the County Council chairman continues, "and from Limerick." Politicians of opposing parties have made the journey from Tralee, old men who nearly fifty years ago fought the ancient invader side by side, only to fight each other, more viciously, in the Civil War. Many still won't shake hands.

At a brief ceremony, Contessa Landini is made a freewoman of Kerry, which she describes as the most moving honour of her life. The first person she embraces after receiving her certificate is Irena Wiśniewski but when she looks for Bruno, he's not there.

The grave he's standing at is set above ground, a long stone casket mottled by the Atlantic windstorms and the lichens. Visitors often leave pebbles as tokens of prayer or respect, or simply to record the fact that someone has been there, that this grave will never go untended so long as Kerry people live. At the funeral, a year and a half ago, there was no representative from the Vatican or from any of the countries whose frightened people he saved. He wouldn't have wanted that, God be good to him, Mr. Clifford says. A modest man, quiet, didn't like attention, a good golfer. At the same time, the absence was noted.

A cluster of bog lilies has been placed on the grave this morning, near a tangled set of wooden rosary beads and two miraculous medals that look like they've been there a long time. The words "God Has No Country" are carved above the name. Bruno Wiśniewski translates them for his wife. Sheep in the adjoining field bawl up at the sky as though resenting the intruders to their empire.

Jo Landini bows her head and begins whispering the sorrowful mystery of the rosary, accompanied by Delia Kiernan, both speaking in Italian, the language that brought them together in another lifetime. Behind them, Mr. Clifford removes his hat and adds his voice to the prayer. Wiśniewski takes off his heavy overcoat, made for the Gdańsk shipyards in winter, spreads it on the gravel. He and his wife kneel down.

They do not know the words of the rosary in Italian or English, so the mystery is added to by the long vowels of Polish and by the things not said at all. Kissing her fingertips, she touches the tombstone, eyes closed.

The day is running on. Mr. Clifford glances prophetically at his watch. There is talk of coming weather. We might think of hitting the road.

At the grave, Bruno Wiśniewski asks his wife and the others for a last moment alone. They head back down the path with Mr. Clifford.

An aeroplane crosses the sky, cresting towards Shannon, its long, grey contrail like a streamer.

Hand on the tombstone, he looks towards the mountain.

A cloud moves.

Seagulls flit.

Taking a golf ball from his pocket, he places it on the grave, and hurries back to the car, for the air smells of rain and the breeze is blowing colder now. You don't want to leave it too long.

On the street, he notices in the distance an older man conversing with Mr. Clifford. Dark-suited, homburg-hatted, now leaning in through the passenger window. It can't be, Bruno thinks. Not after all this time.

Weldrick comes towards him, arms outstretched in silent embrace.

For a long time, nothing is said.

Although some of its characters are inspired by real people, *The Ghosts of Rome* is a work of fiction, in which, as with its predecessor, *My Father's House*, liberties have been taken with facts, characterisations, geographies and chronologies. Incidents have been concentrated, characters amalgamated, renamed, adapted or invented. The Delia, Tom and Blon Kiernan, John May, Hugh O'Flaherty, Sam Derry, and D'Arcy Osborne in these pages are my versions and are not to be relied upon by biographers or researchers. The same is true of the public figures in the novel. *The Ghosts of Rome* is not intended to be a source for students of wartime Rome or the Nazi occupation of Italy.

All sequences offering themselves as transcriptions of interviews, extracts from memoirs or reports are fictional. The archives of the Imperial War Museum (IWM), London, include audio recordings of spoken testimony from wartime escapees. Many are available online. One standout is the interview with Richard Patrick Gibson, catalogue number 12298. I thank the staff at the IWM research room for their welcome. Readers seeking research materials on the Rome Escape Line and the background to this novel are directed to the bibliography in *My Father's House* and to the Escape Line Papers at the US National Archives, on microfilm, titled "Record of Allied Force Headquarters (AFHQ) 1942-46." I thank Jerry O'Grady of the Hugh O'Flaherty Memorial Society for copies of material sent to him by Victor Failmezger. See also "Stories of American Escapees from Prisoner of War Camp 59, Servigliano, Italy" at blogs.archives.gov; Anonymous, "Copy of a letter from Rome" by an English soldier, dated 11th June 1944, IWM, typescript, item 36 (456.32)/5; Owen Chadwick, *Britain and the Vatican During the Second World War* (1986); Jerzy B. Cynk, *The Polish Air Force at War* (1998); Robert Graham SJ, "To Pay a Debt of Honour—the semi-secret operation of Britain's M19 to recompense Italians aiding Allied escapers in World War 2," in *La Civiltà Cattolica,* 19 May 1990; Sgt Johnson (forename unlisted), No. 2 Army Film and Photographic Unit, "Italy: Eighth Army Mobile Surgery in the Field" (1943), IWM Photographs Collection; Douglas Jolly, *Field Surgery in Total War* (1940); Dan Kurzman, *The Race for Rome: How the Eternal City was saved from Nazi Destruction* (1975); D'Arcy Mander, *Mander's March on Rome (1987)*; Medical Department, United States Army, *Surgery in World War II* (1950); John Miller, *Friends and Romans on the Run in Wartime Italy* (1987); Iris Origo, *A Chill in the Air*, written 1939/1940, published 2018, and *War in Val d'Orcia* (1947); Alessandro Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out* (2007); Raleigh Trevelyan, *Rome '44: The Battle for the Eternal City* (1981); J. Trueta MD, *Treatment of War Wounds and Fractures* (1939); War Office, "A field surgery pocket book (revised): memoranda mainly based on experience of the 1939-45 War" (1950), IWM code LBY 77255.

Officer Cadet Pat Lanyon's story of his escape from concentration camp PG 49 is at msmtrust.org.uk, as is the testimony of submariner Michael Pope. I thank Christopher Woodhead of the Monte San Martino Trust; William L. Newnan's *Escape in Italy* (1945) is the transcription of a spoken account given by an escaped United States Ranger. Some medical terms used by Manon Gastaud are borrowed from *Forward Surgery in Modern War* (1944) by Major General W.H. Ogilvie FRCS.

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Joseph O'Connor's *My Father's House* was a *Washington Post* Best Book of the Year and a finalist for the Walter Scott Prize. His 2018 novel *Shadowplay* was named Novel of the Year at the 2019 Irish Book Awards and was a finalist for the prestigious Costa Book Award. O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* was published in thirty-eight languages and won France's Prix Millepages, Italy's Premio Acerbi, the Irish Post Award for Fiction, the Nielsen Bookscan Golden Book Award, an American Library Association Award, the Hennessy/Sunday Tribune Hall of Fame Award, and the Prix Littéraire Zepter for European Novel of the Year. O'Connor is the Inaugural Frank McCourt Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Limerick.

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